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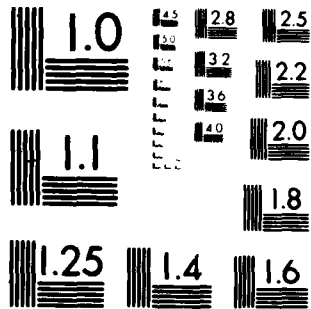
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CLEANTH BROOKS

at the

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

April 11-12, 1978

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Edited by

Lieutenant Colonel James A. Grimshaw, Jr.

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*Cleanth Brooks*  
*Professor Emeritus, Yale University*

(Photograph courtesy of Yale University Information Service)



CLEANTH BROOKS  
Forest Road, Northford, Connecticut 06472

Nov. 15, 1977

Lt. General K.L. Tallman, Superintendent  
U.S. Air Force Academy  
Colorado 80840

Dear General Tallman,

I have just returned from a lecture trip in the South to find your letter of November 8 awaiting my return. I hasten to reply.

I am honored by your invitation to lecture at the Air Force Academy and am happy to accept. The arrangements that you propose are thoroughly satisfactory to me. As for more special details for my visit, I shall keep in touch with Major Grimshaw and Captain Parsons.

I am to visit West Point later this week, and shall be meeting one or two groups of cadets. As you see, I take an interest in our military academies and I particularly look forward to my visit to the Air Force Academy next April.

Sincerely yours,

*Cleanth Brooks*

## PREFACE

Mr. Cleanth Brooks's visit to the United States Air Force Academy marks a milestone in the Department of English's history: he is the first critic of literature to participate in the Cadet Forum on Public Affairs' Distinguished Speakers Program, a program designed to present to cadets views and opinions of leading figures from diverse disciplines. Not mentioned in his formal acceptance of 15 November 1977 (p. viii) was his kind acceptance of our proposal to talk informally in individual classes prior to his formal address to the Cadet Wing. Consequently, English Department members arranged complete coverage of his two-day visit. This volume records that visit and Mr. Brooks's remarks. A brief index provides references to titles and key subjects covered in these remarks.

Mr. Brooks's visit and the publication of this volume were possible through the efforts of a number of people, many of whom often go unnoticed in their otherwise workaday routines. They will not remain here unnamed, however.

To Colonel E. J. Rokke, under whom the Distinguished Speakers Program flourishes, and to Major J. H. Parsons, project officer for Mr. Brooks's visit, our sincere thanks for their splendid administrative support. Major William J. Wallisch coordinated all audio-visual requirements and was ably assisted by the following technicians: Staff Sergeants Thomas Teigue and Nick Barbaro and Mr. Pete Romano.

Lieutenant Colonel B. C. Glidden, Director of Academy Libraries, and Mr. D. J. Barrett, Assistant Director for Public Services, kindly conducted for Mr. Brooks a tour of the Richard Gimbel Aeronautical Library and Special Collections.

Ms. Edie Sportsman, who transcribed the tapes of Mr. Brooks's sessions, and Mrs. Patricia Schweitzer, who typed the final manuscript, offered invaluable assistance. And, of course, Mrs. Becky Shute, and Mrs. Carol Mohr composers, provided our final type setting.

Captain Claude F. Haraway, instructor of English, volunteered to handle the publicity associated with the visit and did many of the thankless "little" jobs which put the finishing touches on the two-day agenda. Captain T. P. Coakley had the painstaking job of proofing the galleys.

And finally, Mr. Brooks's gracious acceptance of the hustle and bustle which he underwent and his sparkling responses and remarks with each group confirmed what we already knew: that he is a gentleman and scholar of the first order. For his sharing part of his busy schedule with us, we are particularly grateful.



*Lieutenant Colonel Ben C. Glidden, Director of the Library, and Mr. Don J. Barrett, Assistant Librarian, show Mr. Brooks the Richard Gimbel Aeronautical Library.*

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Professor Cleanth Brooks, an internationally acclaimed scholar, is one of the most accomplished and respected American literary critics of the twentieth century. He was born in Murray, Kentucky, and grew up in Kentucky and Tennessee, the son of a minister. He attended Vanderbilt University where he met his lifelong friend and co-author, Robert Penn Warren.

After receiving his BA from Vanderbilt and his MA from Tulane University, Professor Brooks attended Oxford (Exeter) as a Rhodes Scholar in 1929. Later, as a professor at Louisiana State University, he founded and edited, with Robert Penn Warren, *The Southern Review* (1935-1942). At LSU, he also composed, again with Warren, three brilliant anthologies: *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *An Approach to Literature* (1941), and *Understanding Fiction* (1943).

After leaving LSU, he became Gray Professor of Rhetoric, Yale University, from 1947-1975. Now Professor Emeritus, Professor Brooks has taught, as visiting professor, at several major southern universities including the University of Texas, Tulane, the Universities of North and South Carolina, and most recently, at the University of Tennessee. Previously he lectured, also as visiting professor, at the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and the Bread Loaf School of English.

He has been a Fellow, Library of Congress (1953-1963), a Guggenheim Fellow (1953 and 1960), a Senate Fellow (1975), and a member of the National Endowment of the Humanities (1975). Professor Brooks served as Cultural Attaché to the American Embassy, London, from 1964-1966. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Philosophical Society.

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**APRIL 11, 1978**



*Mr. Brooks addresses cadets in English 406.*



## ENGLISH 406 CLASS

*English 406, Values in Western World Literature, is a required senior literature class for all cadets. Instructors use Joseph Wood Krutch's The Modern Temper as a provocative background against which selected works of literature—a Shakespearean play and choices from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries—are read. The introduction and initial remarks in this session were not recorded due to technical difficulties. This transcript begins just after the opening remarks.*

CB: I can prime the pump or try to, but I would rather that you do the priming yourself.

Q: Mr. Brooks, I wonder if you would mind speaking for a moment on the enrichment of the reading of poetry for young people who have been disciplined heavily in the sciences and engineering. I don't know if this will encroach on your talk for tomorrow or not.

CB: Well, the talk tomorrow night is on such a big subject that I cannot exhaust it in one talk anyway; so it really won't hurt if it does so—I will try to keep off that generally. Yes, I would be happy to try to say a word. About three nights ago, I attended a dinner at my residential college, Davenport College, to honor one of our fellows at Davenport, Fred Pottle the great authority on James Boswell. The Boswell papers are now at Yale. Pottle's story was retold by himself and by two or three other people. Here was a young man who in college went into chemistry and was doing very well indeed in chemistry, and he planned to be a chemist. He discovered a particular English poet in his senior year. That changed his life. It changed it so much that he went into the graduate school and has been one of the great forces in the English Department at Yale ever

since. He is still going strong at eighty. I am not meaning to scare you—that you will get interested in some particular poet or fiction writer and you will find that you have to drop everything you are doing now and become somebody else. Rather, something much more modest: this can be not a cataclysm in someone's life; it can indeed be an enriching event or open a whole new world to you. It can make the world you have chosen richer or more interesting than it ever was before. I think, therefore, that one can say this: all of us who use language should be, or ought to be close to literature—who can't even write in my opinion, good clean unpretentious lucid prose without having some kind of knowledge of literature. The truth is that most of you know some kind of qualitative literature right now. The real choice is between hand-me-downs and whatever the popular writers want to sell you; or the real thing by making your own choice, you will have a much bigger and richer choice. I am going to try to illustrate that tomorrow evening; so maybe I will postpone that specific illustration for the moment.

I have been asked all my life by Deans of medical schools, "for goodness sake, why don't you in the English Department teach these people how to read and write—teach them how to handle the language? We deans usually find that we have to teach them biology and chemistry all over again and do it right this time since some liberal arts colleges don't do it right always. We can handle that, but what we can't do is something about their acquaintance with history, literature, and such matters as only a study of language can give them." Or consider this incident: Soon after I came to Yale—Judge Jerome Frank of the Law School invited me to lunch. It was very flattering for a young cub to be invited by this man who was a great name in the law profession. I found that he was teaching a course at the Yale Law School, and what was he teaching? He was teaching a course in composition. He said, "You know we have these young men here who are as bright as they can be. They are going on ahead to become great lawyers. But even the best of them don't write good clean lucid briefs, and I have elected—because I think it is so important within my later years—I have decided to give a course in composition. I want to talk to you about it. You have been doing books with Mr. Warren on writing manuals and so on. This is what I am doing. What do you think of it?"

Again, I remember a colonel telling me during the Second World War: "Look; what is the use of our spending thousands and thousands of dollars and hours of time training somebody to be a first rate observer in a plane. Then, when he gets back to the base, he can't tell you very clearly what he has seen—or what he has observed."

These are perfectly obvious illustrations, but they come from people

who are not English professors—military men, MD's, lawyers—all of whom are testifying to the fact that a real knowledge of the language, which I have already said always comes in the same box with some knowledge of literature, is important—even if you are going to be in one of the great technological fields.

Now you see the consequences of letting me loose and letting me talk. So, now for some more questions a little nearer perhaps of concern to most of you. You look as though you might be getting ready to ask a question. Can I appeal to you?

Q: How do you go about doing that? Do you give more English to the high school student or to the college student? I have always wanted to write, and I don't think that this ambition has changed very much. I still want to.

CB: Well, in the first place, I am going to accept with all the proper reservations that you are a modest, bright young man and that you probably write much better than you're letting on you do, but, in wanting more training, you have a very real point. I hope that I am not offending anybody when I say that it seems to me that the greatest boondoggle we have had in this country in the last fifty years has been public education. Now I am making allowance for some schools and some dedicated teachers working against heavy odds. Yet I think that on the whole, teaching people how to read and write as generally done by our public school system—in both elementary and high school—has been a disaster. Surely some good people have come out of it; surely some have survived. Some get out of it, then on to college to write and read well; but a great many don't. Whether you are being too modest or whether you are telling us what is the unvarnished truth about yourself, in any case, this is certainly what a great many people tell me and what comes out again and again in papers they write.

I would say that there are two issues here at least. One is what good citizens can try to do about improving the system. Generally, I think it badly needs overhauling with possibly new methods and new goals, and better teachers. That is the general problem. But personally each one of you have your own special problem because if you are here inadequately equipped, you have your own house to set in order—whatever can or cannot be done to set the national house in order.

To speak of your individual situation: I don't think everything can be done with only a few college courses. On the other hand, you can make a start. More than that, you have a faculty here that would like nothing better than to have people quietly say to them, "what specific advice can

you give me about books I might read, about courses that I might take," because my feeling—I hope that I'm right about this—I am convinced I am right about this—my feeling is that the problem is ordinarily not in the lack of IQ or the lack of sensitivity, or the lack of alertness in some of us who feel that we can't write sufficiently well. The potentiality is there. More than that if you can get started properly, if you can see what is at stake, you have perhaps 40 to 60 years to keep working at it. Don't stop learning just when you feel that you have finished a few courses. In fact those courses, if they tell you what the possibilities are, set you reading books the rest of your life.

Yours is a very general question to which I think there is no satisfactory brief answer. But you see, I can't be more particular at this point except to say: "Yes, I accept what you say. I think yours is an honest report of what may be typical of the nation in general. Does that seem at all a fair answer?"

Q: Sir, in line with the question of education now, how do you feel about the impact television has had in the 40's and 50's? Instead of seeing the written material, just seeing—what kind of effect has it had on our writing ability? What do you feel we can do to make this more creative for the observer?

CB: That is a good question, and I am glad you have asked it. Let me preface my remarks because what I am going to say is going to sound very priggish and downgrading to television. Let me begin, therefore, by saying that my wife and I have just made a long-delayed purchase of a first-rate color television—having limped along with a poor machine for a long, long time—and finally we think that with adjustments on the aerial, we are going to get educational television and Channel 13 in New York which has some decent programs that we know we would like to see. So I am not against television as such at all, and I do not condemn all programs. Among other things, I think sports on TV come out fine. I think one can also see some great dramas rather than seeing what are often times shabby plays in New York City and so on and so on. I am all for the proper use of television. On the other hand, I think that up to now, this medium has proved to be disastrous.

Years ago—in the 1950's if I remember—I had recently come to Yale and Arthur Koestler—some of you may have heard his name; he wrote a famous book called *The Yogi and the Commissar* and another one called *Arrow in the Blue*—was visiting Yale as a lecturing fellow. He had conversations with students, gave some lectures and so on. It was my pleasant duty one day to take him to lunch, to help out in the entertaining

and showing him around. I took him to lunch at Mory's and what did he talk about? "Mr. Brooks, do you Americans realize what you are doing to your children?" I said, "No, what are we doing to our children?" "You are killing their imagination. The television is going to be ruinous to them. Though people like you and me have grown in mind and imagination by reading books, future generations may cease to read them. They are going to sit passively in front of the tube. They are going to lose their imaginations, not having to participate in making the words on a page come alive."

I thought, very frankly, that though Koestler is a very great man whose writing I admire very much, surely he is allowing himself to get needlessly upset. Looking back now to 1952, I think he has proved a true prophet.

Let me make the point again. It is not that the instrument itself is bad—that's not the point—it can be used and is being used for fine entertainment and for the growth and development of the human being. There is no question about that, but we know how it is generally being used. We also know of children who cannot read and write, because they are spending an average of ten hours a day, eight hours a day, or six hours a day watching television.

I think the real problem is this: anything that kills the positive use of the imagination—your own participation in a story being told, a drama being rendered—is destructive. Anything that bypasses intellectual and imaginative participation can be ruinous. I think that a lot of our problems—for example, one of the reasons for the low national average in literacy—the average has been dropping steadily for the last ten years—is the fact that we are now encountering a generation which was brought up on passive television viewing.

Now there is nothing specific we can do about it. I am not suggesting somebody bomb CBS or ABC, nor do I know any easy ways to get better programs. You here can do what we can later on as individual citizens. As far as your individual cases are concerned, you might if you watch television try to limit yourself a little or try to discriminate more and, in any case, try to keep up your own reading though not necessarily heavy musty tomes. There is plenty of exciting contemporary reading which can develop your mind and develop your imagination. Again your English faculty here will be happy to make some suggestions, and—I hope this doesn't sound like a threat—if you start doing that, the taste will grow on you. You will find that you will enjoy it. You will be the opposite of the Irishman watching the Englishman eating lettuce for lunch, who said: "Look at that man! I am so glad I don't like lettuce, because if I liked it I would be eating the damned stuff all the time and I hate it."

**Q:** How do you feel about society's saying that there is too much emphasis on college education?

**CB:** Well, I think that society has put too much emphasis on the wrong aims of college education. This is understandable. In a democratic society, we want everybody to go to college. I agree that a college education ought to be available for everybody capable of taking it, and most people are capable of taking it. I think the fraud in college education has come about in this way: too many in our population have forgotten what a college education used to mean, what it could mean, and what it ought again to mean. Not all that pretends to give what was once associated with a college education actually provides it even if the graduate ends up with a diploma with BA on it.

For example, many people believe that the real reason for going to college is to get a job, or to get a better place in our society. They confuse a college education with what is learned in a kind of training school. Training schools are fine; we ought to have them; we ought to have better ones than we have now. But those of us who believe in the humanities would wish for you to have both a college education and job training—training which will allow you to find and execute a job well, but also the things that the old liberal arts college education professed to give and still gives in a first-rate liberal arts college.

I think that as a matter of fact we have allowed our people to become confused about what a college is really for. The result is that we have, in effect, been paying for products bearing the label of "College Education," when what we pay for is adulterated—even shoddy—merchandise. For example, at the first university at which I taught—not the worst of universities and thank goodness it has now become, thirty years later, a much better university—I have taught there recently; so I know that it has improved. When I first started teaching there, I was supposed to be teaching college English; but I had to take the students where I found them, and I found that in reality I was teaching eighth grade English. Maybe sometimes it was fifth grade English. That is what you must do: you start where the student is. Still it was a little fraudulent for the taxpayers of the state to be paying me to teach college English when I wasn't doing anything like that. Other comments or questions?

**Q:** What do you attribute that problem to—when you get a college freshman and you have to start at the eighth grade level?

CB: Well, I would say—I don't want to seem dogmatic about this. Therefore, let me begin with a needful explanation. I have not taught at Yale all my life. Furthermore, Yale is not just a rich man's school. It has tried very hard to become something other than that. I think it has succeeded. In any case, I have not taught at Yale all my life. I began teaching in a big, struggling state university; so I have seen that side and I think that is important. I think that teaching in general is terribly important. But the underpinning for that state school, where I began teaching, the grammar schools and high schools that fed into it were simply not doing their job. Now I don't want to get sued for libel by citing some of the things that they failed to do—I must be more general. Yet I think that one can fairly say that the system—granted that there were a few excellent teachers in the system—that the system was using a poor method and had the wrong goals.

In fact, as I was telling somebody earlier, the only subject in a state university that is regularly well taught is football. I am all for football and it was the game I most enjoyed in prep school. I know I was not very much of a player. But it is a great game and we had lots of fun and that's the point. The reason why football is well taught at nearly all of our state universities and most other schools is that you pick people who are capable of being trained and you get the best people to train them that you can hire and you have a perfectly visible way to find out whether the coaches are good at what they are undertaking to teach. If the coach is not doing the job, we say we want a different one and we may ask him to use a different method. Give up the "T," go back to the single wing, but do something.

Well, in too many of our schools and colleges we don't do that when we teach reading, writing, or the humanities, do we? Nobody ever gets fired. Yet I think that the general failure—a few exceptions noted and taken account of—the general failure of this system is apparent. Something is terribly wrong. I don't want to go into detail here, and I don't want to launch into a diatribe with the teacher's colleges, and I don't want to talk about state legislatures that have been lobbied to put everything into the hands of the teachers' colleges. Let's simply settle for this: I think that most of us have to agree that whatever has been tried has failed; and if America can be waked up to the fact that it "has been had"—maybe with the best intentions—but nevertheless, it "has been had"—maybe we can get a different system. Maybe we can get some better teachers and maybe we can get better goals. Maybe we can stop doing what used to be done in some of the states and still is done—where students are promoted automatically just because it would be bad for their psyche if they've failed. They don't promote the people that can't make

the football team. They pat them on the back and say, "Good try fellow, but sorry" and cut them from the squad.

Q: So at what point do you think that the student is forced to learn from the teacher? I mean where do they divide? I am sure there are some students at universities who do learn from their teachers. How do you get through to those who are not learning?

CB: How do I answer a question like that? Not that it's a bad question. In fact, it is a very good question. But is there any way of really answering it short of writing two or three books? If you did that, would it still be answered? I have written two or three books on the subject. But I am not sure that if you had read them you would even then feel that I had given an adequate answer.

I don't think that there is any final answer. I think everyone has to put it in his own way. There is no fool-proof procedure which will ensure that student A gets the right kind of instruction from instructor B and so on and on. That can't be done. On the other hand, what we could do I believe—and it's about as much as we have a right to expect—is this: we could try to get all who will listen to us to realize the importance of the project. Why it is really important to learn certain things; why it is not simply of second-order priority. And I trust enough in the American character and the general brightness of American youth that such a message could be got over to them. They would find out the importance of such learning and seek out those teachers who can import it. They would also get interested in pursuing such learning on their own.

You know there is a great deal that can be done by oneself in regard to language and literature. Perhaps the greatest twentieth-century novelist we have in America—I think that on this matter is a general consensus—is William Faulkner. He failed in English in his high school in Oxford, Mississippi, and made his worst marks in English, not because he was a stupid student but presumably because he was a very bright student. Such was the folly that was being done. Faulkner went for part of a year to the University of Mississippi—maybe a term after he returned from military training to become an Air Force pilot (the war ended before he could actually get to flying). He came to the University as a special student and took a course or so and then again dropped out.

Now I am not trying to rail Faulkner's teachers in high school or at the then professors at the University of Mississippi. My real point is this: whether they were good or whether they were poor teachers, Faulkner is the living example of how much self-teaching can be done in the mastery of language and literature. Our greatest twentieth-century



novelist didn't always spell correctly. Granted. He sometimes used words in very strange senses because he was either too lazy to look them up in the dictionary or was just too confident that he knew what they meant. Yet granted all those flyspeck blemishes, he has turned out to be one of the great master's of our language though self-taught, or practically all self-taught. And how did he teach himself? Well, he has told us again and again: he did it by reading. He was fascinated by seeing how other people used the language. Now few of us have the drive of Faulkner to become literary figures, and there are no reasons why we should. And few of us have the kind of native genius, talent—whatever you want to call it—that a writer like that has, yet his achievement tells its own story.

On the other hand, I am not supposing that by using his method we can become great novelists. . . What I am saying is that his case is an indication that the student who really cares and has some ability can learn—quite apart from the conventional formal educational system—to be a respectable writer. I think that ought to be a matter of encouragement for all of us. In fact, it may for some of you, when you discover that there are no more courses that you can take either because there are too few listed in the catalogue or because you have finished your college work. After all you do have the rest of your lives, if you once decide the matter is important and interesting. You probably won't end up Faulkners, but you might well end up as people who have become able, resourceful readers and writers. I see a hand back there.

Q: Just out of curiosity, did you ever run into William F. Buckley as a student? And secondly, how would you criticize what he has written?

CB: That is an interesting question. I got to Yale to teach about the time that Buckley was finishing his career as a student. I never had Bill Buckley as a student, although I had a younger brother of his who was a student and took one or two courses with me. But I met Bill Buckley early, partly because I was a fellow at Davenport College, which was his college, and partly because we had some things in common and because his favorite professor was a good friend of mine. So I saw a good deal of him. I don't see him much now, but the connection has not entirely lapsed.

I share many of Bill Buckley's values and beliefs. I don't share them all. I sometimes think that Bill Buckley's so bright that it's rather a pity he has turned out to be something of a General Motors Republican. I am not really the one to think that whatever is good for General Motors is good for the country. In some things it may be, but anyway, that is another

matter. I do share many of Buckley's values, and I do have a great admiration for his handling of the language. I must say that I think a great deal of that is owed to Bill himself. We have now and for years have had a good English department at Yale. But Bill was not a specialist in English. He was bright, industrious, resourceful, very much interested in ideas, and just taught himself to write pretty much on his own. I like to read his column. I don't always agree with him, but I think he can really knock the language around. I get a fine joyful sound out of it. Yes.

Q: Sir, would you agree that problems today in writing are a reflection of the attitude of society?

CB: I think a great part of such problems are; yes.

Q: For example, Mr. Buckley is striving for individual excellence versus the attitude that "society owes me a living"?

CB: No. In this matter, I don't entirely agree with Bill's position. The one thing that has been useful for Bill is the feeling that work is good. Although he is a good Roman Catholic, I don't know of anybody who pursues the so-called Protestant work ethic more than Bill. This attitude, I am sure, has been a support to Bill. Anyway that is what Bill has done; he has a real drive as well as a real intelligence.

And I suppose that if society cared more about excellence in these fields, more such people would be produced. Society's goals do, to a great extent, determine what individual citizens do well. The Old South, for example, didn't produce much in the way of literature. It did not produce much in the way of literature because it was on the defensive politically. It fed its talent into law and politics and the army. In its bones, perhaps, it felt the Civil War coming on. At any rate it took a defensive posture, and it is plain that the writers of the period thought themselves quite often a little out of it. Then, why was it the South suddenly in 1920 began to lead, for a time, the rest of the nation in the production of literature? There was not just Faulkner; there was a whole swarm—a constellation—of great writers. The answer there again is complicated, but one of the factors was that some of the society had gotten to the point where it was interested in telling a story—telling its own story—expressing itself, and once society turned its interest that way, the children of that society responded and you had this great resurgence of literature. Not so much a resurgence, I should say, as a first surge of literature because the South had never had anything like it before. So the society and its attitudes obviously are very important, in the very matter

we are talking about here. Yes.

Q: What role should the humanities play in the life of a military person?

CB: I think a great role. Some of the great commanders of the past were people for whom literature, in the terms in which they conceived it, was terribly important. After all, Alexander the Great had as his tutor whom? Aristotle, "the first of those who know"; that's pretty good. And so it goes. But I would say that the value of the humanities for all sorts of people—not just military, for all sorts of people—is finally an indirect value. You will not be able to say that in this or that specific situation it will be directly of use. Yet some of the most important values we have, some of the most important disciplines we have, do their work indirectly. But because it is indirect, it must not be discounted. I should say that the military man who is interested, not merely in the question of how to defend or how to attack or how best to deploy a nation's military resources is sure to be interested in the total human enterprise that he is trying to defend. If, primarily the values of his own country, yet he is going to wish for his country the best values. He is going to wish that his country's statesmen are the wisest and ablest of men in all kinds of ways. But to discuss this matter now is to get into the topic I hope to talk about next evening; so I won't describe it any further except to say that I should think that the military man ought, of all of us, to be the man with the most detachment and the widest vision. He is required to take the long view. For him in particular the history, not of just one or two past wars but of the history of civilizations and its literature ought to be important. He will want to ask himself not merely how do I adjust to this set of values to experience these values in their best expression. The values then will be an abiding inspiration to him. Yes.

Q: Sir, I have a question that relates to the English class that we are taking now. We are doing a lot based on the thoughts of one individual named Krutch. Sir, have you ever read any of his work?

CB: Yes, I have read some of his work many years ago. I have not read any recently, and I actually met Krutch on one occasion. I had a talk with him and was impressed with his book, not merely that one, but several of his books.

Q: What are your thoughts on his pessimistic attitudes?

CB: Well, I share some of his pessimism, but my interpretation as I look

back over the years, my feeling is that his tended to be an unmitigated pessimism whereas my pessimism is not unmitigated. I think our civilization is not doomed. We have great strengths on our side. Yet I am aware that what I would call my realism about the human circumstance does impress some of my friends as pessimism. But these considerations could lead to a whole lecture on the subject. I'll confine myself, however, to only a word or two.

I think that one of the weak cards in our hand is our millennialism, our utopianism, our beliefs that we can outguess history, that we can understand and fully predict the behavior of human beings, that we can discard the past as something irrelevant, and dismiss the teachings of the past. Let me give some instances of our confidence. Woodrow Wilson promised a war to end all wars. John F. Kennedy promised a new frontier. Such promises usually turn out to be delusions. We may be much better off if we take a more realistic view of ourselves, and a less hopeful view of the future. But this doesn't necessarily mean that we hold a defeatist view of the future nor does it mean cynicism. What it does mean that we are willing to face the hard facts of reality.

I think that some of this attitude was in Krutch and that Krutch was in conscious or unconscious revulsion against the kind of utopianism, a state of mind that is indigenous to Americans. I used to tell my classes, it is impossible for me to blaspheme before you except on one subject. I can say all kinds of wicked things and you are not going to be bothered particularly. But if I express a considered doubt about the doctrine of progress, you will all look at each other. And if I persist in that kind of talk, arguing that progress is neither automatic or inevitable, you will quickly decide that you have a subversive person on your hands. Maybe, we had better call the FBI or something. And if I continue, you might say that "he is just a nut as all these English professors tend to be." For my questioning one's belief in progress would come closest to blasphemy.

Now having gone that far, let me try to clarify my position. I don't want you to put me down as just a nut. I grant that there has been plenty of progress *in specific areas*. Present-day surgery is so much ahead of the surgery of any past time, and one is thankful for it. Dentistry is so much better than in the past. Our machinery in general is so much more powerful that we have put all the mechanisms of the past ages to shame. On the other hand, I am not sure that the human being as such is basically any better or anymore likely to make the right choices. This circumstance puts a great responsibility on us of the present day because we do possess such heightened powers to do good or ill. Bad choices now might do much more damage than in the past. Power as such is indifferent. It can be used for doing something lasting and wonderful or to destroy our world.

Such talk again trenches on the talk that I am scheduled to give tomorrow evening. But I would return to your question as a parting sentence or so. I think probably it is a very good thing for a group of people like yourselves to be reading Krutch, partly because of his realism, partly because Krutch is a man who is trying to take a long-view of our civilization, its strengths and its weaknesses. I don't know of any group that I would rather have take that view than the young men who are to be the commanders of our military forces in the future. Now let's see which of you had your hand up first? Okay.

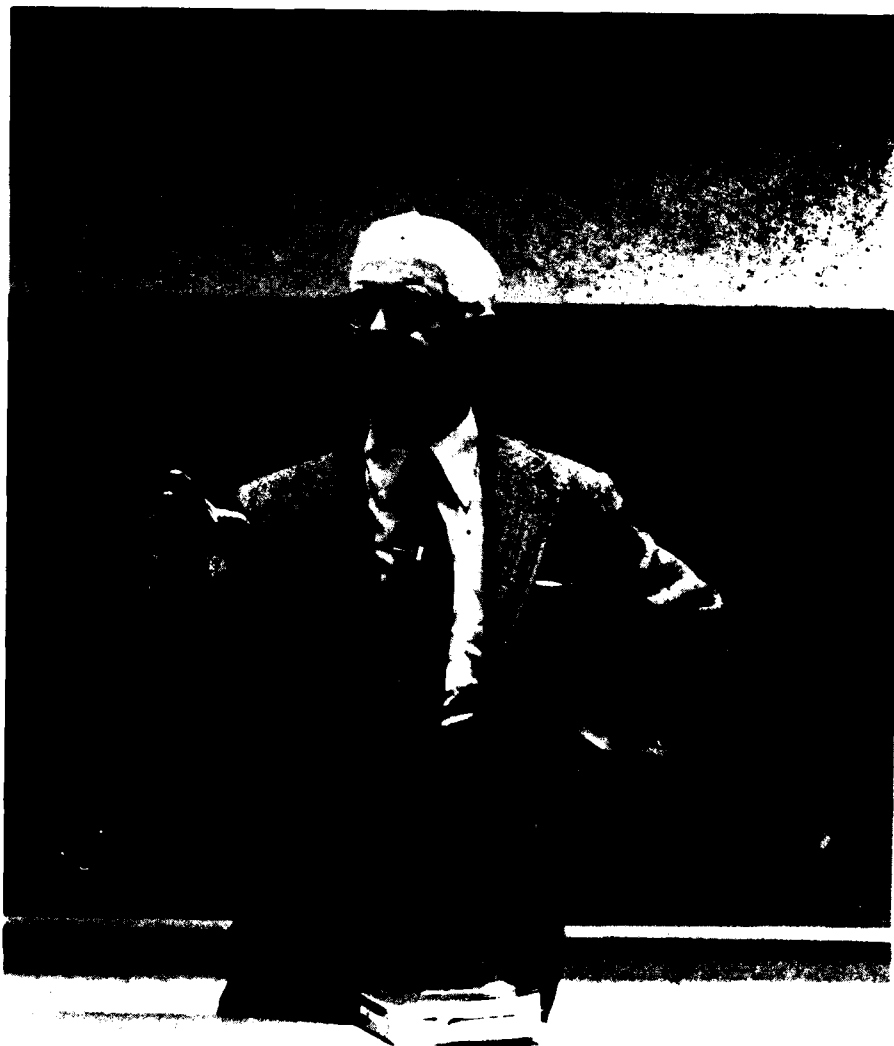
Q: This may be longer than what we have time for and may be a little unfair, but I would like to say that most of the seniors in this room will probably go on to graduate school naturally and would pursue degrees in civil engineering, chemistry, and so forth. But I think there are a few, maybe a very few who would say, I would like to get a degree in English or philosophy, and I want to make up what I have not learned. But I am not marketable. What would you say to someone like that? Maybe he thought he had some talent and even though he might be happy doing that, he certainly could not be guaranteed any kind of marketability.

CB: Well, again, I would have to be realistic and say that nobody can guarantee your marketability. We have oversold the wrong conception of graduate work. We have done something which is perfectly stupid. We have given the implied promise of an academic career to hundreds of young PhD's, and now the market is glutted, all of which means a great many of the very best of them can't get jobs. I am well aware of the problem, and I think that the English departments of the country are seriously at fault in letting this debacle occur. On the other hand, I have a more encouraging word for that special person who says, "Look, I want to go on in the humanities anyway, I'll take my chances." My prediction would be that there won't be many who will make this choice, but they will probably be the very people most likely to survive. After all, we are not going to give up education in this country just because of the present job problem. And we are going to need people who are able, and those who do survive the present time of trouble will probably turn out to be the most dedicated, the best qualified, and in general the future leaders in their professions.

I remember that I first tried for a job in the depth of the Depression. I returned from Oxford University without a PhD because I had decided that though I had a BA and an MA, if I were going to a British university, I ought to do the degree that the British regarded as their best. So I got an Honors BA. Then I did a B. Litt., a graduate degree which I could take by

continuing one more year. Thus, I returned to this country with a graduate degree of sorts but I didn't have the "union card," a PhD. Worse than that, I found that Oxford spoke in very low unheard syllables in this country. I had no connection with any of the big Ivy-League universities in the East nor in any of the powerful Midwestern universities. I couldn't even hear of possible openings, because I wasn't on the grapevine. In fact, I got a job just three weeks before the term opened in 1932.

I got it, in part, because I was lucky. The man who had voted for my election as a Rhodes Scholar had become a dean at Louisiana State University. Although he was a political scientist and so couldn't give me a job in the English department, he could at least give me some encouragement and get me a hearing with the English people. So I know what it is like to write letter after letter in a hopeless job market and be turned down again and again. My sympathy is to anyone now facing such a difficult situation. Yet I do believe that the future of the dedicated person who wants to go on in the humanities is not hopeless. But he must certainly be aware of the risks he is taking. In the meantime, I think it behooves us elders in English literature to try to do some remodeling of the PhD and our programs generally: We must better equip our graduates to cope with the world they are going to enter. For one thing we must better prepare them to teach rather than forcing them into more and more intricate research projects. Our PhD programs have got out of hand. Maybe that is the note I ought to close on as I see the clock marking the end of this period.



*Mr. Brooks responds candidly to cadets' questions about literature's relation to their future careers.*



*That afternoon, Mr. Brooks met with members of the English Department. Colonel Jack M. Shuttleworth, Professor and Head, is also pictured.*



### MEETING WITH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH FACULTY

*This afternoon meeting was planned to allow individual department members to meet Mr. Brooks. The following questions ensued.*

Q: What is your view of our profession?

CB: Well, I am afraid that my view of the profession at the moment is rather bleak, rather pessimistic. I think we have done far worse than the doctors and lawyers have done. I don't always approve of what they have done; but they have found at least a way not to overproduce young doctors and lawyers. In fact, I think that the number of physicians is too small. We in English have no organization except the very, very loose Modern Language Association, and the result is that we have poured forth PhD's, some of them excellently trained but some of them less well trained. In any case, they are certainly in excess of what the job market has been able to absorb. I think we have done a great disservice to the young aspiring teacher of the humanities. We at least implied promises that cannot be fulfilled. I don't think that all the English departments or other literature departments are equally guilty. One with which I have been associated within the last thirty years actually cut back a little during those years rather than expanding. We all know what happened, and I think it is very hard on the young man and young woman now looking for a job. I hope that the most devoted and the most able of these young scholars will survive, but we have let them in for a very hard period. Many will drop out.

They just can't find a place. What is worse in our overproduction, we have somewhere along the line managed to produce some incompetents. Some of them do not have a sound notion of what literature is and how it

ought to be taught. In saying this I may be too much influenced by my attempts during the last three years to finish my second Faulkner book.<sup>1</sup> Let me particularize. The last *MLA Bibliography* lists 432 items on Faulkner in the way of published books and articles. That's a great many for one year's harvest. Well, you can't read them all. I haven't but during the last decade I've been sampling vigorously; and though I have found, as one would expect, some excellent work, I also found a great deal that was tedious and repetitive and added nothing to our knowledge. Worst of all, I found a great deal which seemed to me positively bad and misleading. If the situation is that bad in Faulkner criticism, I have no reason to believe that it is substantially better anywhere else. What I have read constitutes a fair sample.

I am afraid that this means we have produced literature scholars who still do not know how to write proper prose or how to write a well-argued article. Nevertheless, we have been forcing them in one way or another, to publish, publish, publish—even when they had nothing to say or ought to have waited to substantiate and articulate what they believe they have to say. So I feel very pessimistic about what we have done. I say “we” because I believe that collectively we older people in the profession have to take some responsibility for the sins of omission and commission that have occurred.

That does not mean, however, that I think that the humanities are of no importance, or are of less importance, because I think they are of more importance than ever. I think that real gains have been made in scholarship in the last twenty-five or thirty years. I cannot imagine, unless the culture goes all to pieces, that there is not going to be a place, an important place, for people who will be studying the humanities and for people who will be teaching the humanities in the years ahead. I believe I told you earlier that right after World War II, I told a friend who asked, “What do you think is going to happen to education?” that I believed that the best would become even better and that the worse would become even worse. I remember that I also said that the general level would fall. I have found nothing to make me believe that I wasn't rather accurate in my prediction.

Well, for the first question—that was a tedious and long answer to the first question. The second question . . . .

Q: Whether to give a broad-brush survey treatment in the one course every student must take in literature? Whether to give them a broad survey of one of two great works by five or six great authors or instead to focus narrowly on two or three of the greatest figures and spend a great deal of time of them?

CB: I have no advice there that I think is worth anything, for I have no real feeling about, or special commitment to, either plan. At Yale a course in literature which they devised long ago was their prime course for people who were going to be studying literature. It was a kind of compromise between an extensive survey and an intensive discussion of several authors. It involved six, seven, or eight authors. The course began with a study of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare. Sometimes Donne was substituted for Spenser. One went on to Wordsworth, one of the great Victorians, and T.S. Eliot or W.B. Yeats.

I think it worked very well. It was certainly regarded by the people who taught it and by many who took it as a really very valuable course.

As for my own opinion as distinguished from the typical Yale opinion, I would rather increase the number of authors read, for I would probably prefer that a little over just let's say three great authors. But I am not sure that it really makes a great deal of difference if you are limited to one author to represent the Age of Reason, and only one man to represent the Romantic Revolt, and only one man to represent the Elizabethan age you will not be teaching much literary history anyway. So I don't think that the precise number of writers matters too much. There is, however, one important point that I would insist on. There must be enough intensive work on particular writers and texts to ensure that the student learns how to read a literary document. Just abstract literary "history" or biographies and human interest anecdotes about the authors are not enough. For if you study Milton, say, and don't know how to read his poetry as poetry, then the study of Milton will be reduced to the nonliterary Milton—the political or theological or at any rate prose Milton. As a course in literature, such study would be a fraud.

That is the best I can do on this subject. The really important thing is to see that we don't drift back either into the study of just chronological-biographical-historical material merely or that we don't get into some of the newfangled ways in reading literature such as working out all of the possible Oedipus complexes one can find in Milton or indulging in "symbol-hunting." Literature is indeed symbolic. What I reprehend here is the practice of treating symbols as if they were plums in a plum pudding: like little Jack Horner you stick your thumb in and pull out the plum; that is the symbol and not whether it came out of Freud or out of the *Golden Bough*. Then the discoverer says: look what a smart boy am I. Such a view of literary symbols seems to me to violate the whole nature of literary symbolism. Authors—at least sound authors—do not stick these little loaded plums into their poems or novels. Rather, they develop a particular scene or action or object in such a way that the reader

comes to recognize that it has symbolic value. I have been too long-winded, but the question was good and you tempted me, and I did eat and speak.

Q: Sir, how do you feel about reading a complete work versus an excerpt or a short version? Do you think that there is a great deal lost by reading a short version?

CB: Good question. I think it depends very much on the group you are teaching, and on the things that you are excerpting. In this "famous" course at Yale, that I alluded to a few minutes ago, we did not often attempt to teach complete works. The whole of the *Canterbury Tales*? No. It was never finished, a fragment anyway, and we studied some selections. The whole of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*? No, we read a book or two. But of course Spenser never completed the *Faerie Queene*. But you obviously could not teach Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in excerpts, for that would be to violate all that makes it a great poem. Thus, I don't mind at all using excerpts if they are done under certain circumstances and with certain ends in view, although I would always hope that a good deal of literature, particularly lyrical poetry and meditative poetry, would be taught as wholes.

Q: When does teaching writing fit in?

CB: Well, I think that it's got to be included somewhere. The Yale situation, I think, is a special one. I am aware of that. As I was telling an earlier group, I am very glad that I taught my first fourteen years at a big, growing state university because I would not have this present group think that I was seeing things only from the vantage of Yale's ivory tower. I have seen the other side. Yale has tried to get by, by having a good deal of writing in the freshman year, but writing about literary documents, and the combination of teaching composition with literature will probably be all right if you have pretty well-trained students at the outset. You can teach them a good deal about writing while you are teaching them how to read.

On the other hand, Yale found out in the old days that this procedure would not work for everyone. So they put in a course that would do little more than teach composition. Yet, having abandoned that course for a few years, Yale has now, I understand, had to reinstate it. Yale is now admitting students who really need some remedial work. Most colleges have to take a student where it finds him, and if he can't write it is almost a dead certainty that he can't read. Or if he can read but can't write, then he

cannot tell you enough about what he has read. I would suggest that in most cases the thing to do is to teach students to write, try to get in as much writing as possible through intensive work in small classes. In any case, there should be some study of literature to do two things! First, to remind the student that part of learning how to write is to read the masters who show us what good writing is, that is, who provide examples. Second, to relieve some of the tedium of the young man or woman who is doing the composition course. The student needs a little nourishment himself, and his instructor needs to have some relief that the tedium of teaching composition usually entails. But the two things are reciprocal. In many cases I think that probably the writing would come first. But, you apply the grease to the wheel that is squeaking loudest. That would be the general rule.

Several times of late I have come close to launching a diatribe on the subject of American people's having been sold a pup in our great public educational system. There has been much effort and so much expenditure of money and yet so little to show for it. On the whole it has been a lamentable failure. Certainly there have been many dedicated teachers and there has been in this school or that, excellent teaching. Yet if a football team had no better record season in and season out, the coach would be fired and a new system installed. For the American public means business about football. It demands success in that field.<sup>2</sup>

Q: With your statement about the public educational system's being such a failure, could you point to an assumption or two that you think has led to that failure?

CB: I must try not to get out of my depth in discussing our public educational system. I cannot claim to be an authority. But a few circumstances seem obvious. The educationists have propagated a bad theory of education and sold it to the state legislatures. There has been a bad method of training teachers. It has been fatuous to say that teaching is not an art, but a procedure that can be taught to almost anybody. Our special teachers colleges claim to teach one how to teach. They have claimed that they can teach anyone to teach any subject, whether he knows anything about the subject or not. Such claims, stated or implied, have not been justified in practice. At L.S.U. in the 1930's and 40's I was exposed to all of that, for fourteen years. I think the educationists had bad methods, illusive goals, wrong goals. For example, we were told that they meant to teach the whole child rather than to teaching a subject. But this distinction is no more than a rhetorical ploy. When you talk about teaching the whole child, do you mean teaching something to be whole

child or teaching a subject that you think will make the child whole?

No one offers a false option in distinguishing between teaching a subject or teaching a student. Surely there is no contradiction in attempting to do both. If the American people had been better trained in logic or had simply exercised common sense, they would not have accepted this kind of propaganda. But I must not go further on that subject.

To sum it up, we are stuck with the present system—for quite a time, I suspect—and we must do the best we can. We must rescue the perishing. You are bound to have some first-rate students with interesting minds and high IQ's who have been mishandled in their knowledge of the language. And obviously all you can do is either give up and send them home or try to salvage the damage now as well as best you can. My only point is that all of us have to be well aware of the present situation though, of course, it seems wasteful to employ faculty to teach college subjects, only to find that they must in fact teach elementary subjects or high school subjects instead.

Q: Yes sir, some critics note a dichotomy between critics and scholars. I was wondering whether this dichotomy exists and whether we should follow along a critical line or a scholarly line in today's world?

CB: Well, one can make the distinction—yours is a good question—one can make the distinction, and I think that we ought to keep the distinction in mind. The ideal is to have both experts in the same package, because if you are trying to teach the values of literature and trying to talk about how it is put together and therefore how it says what it says, you may very well need to have some scholarship or else know how to work up references and the factual background of the poem or novel. In the lecture I am to give tomorrow evening, certain of my illustrations involve a kind of rudimentary scholarship mingled with a more specifically critical exercise. Scholarship and criticism ought to go together, and if one is teaching Marvell's "Horation Ode" to students who have not heard of the English Civil War and who don't know who King Charles was and what he stood for, nor Cromwell and what he was and what he stood for, one can't teach the poem in critical terms.

Yet mere scholarship is not sufficient if one is to try to teach the meaning and power of literature. In my first year in graduate school, I got nothing but straight scholarship. It was assumed that the students were already able to read and evaluate literature. We were not simply fed dates, places, the history of ideas—all of it of value but which left it up to the student to make something of the works of the imagination. Most of us

need help to do that. So I would hope that any person who is teaching literature will be enough of a scholar to know how to use the scholarship accumulated and necessary, but that he will also know enough about the makeup of a literary work and what kind of truth it gives and how it functions, to be able to assist the innocent who doesn't know how to read a literary document into the fullness that the poem or novel has to offer. You have a good question. I hope that is of some help. Yes.

Q: More specifically, do you think that is part of scholarship or textual criticism?

CB: Well, the textual critics should know something about literature. Scientific textual criticism, by the way, has become very vigorous in our times. If you don't mind the personal anecdote, I'll indulge myself. Some years ago I got a telephone call from the director of the Center for Editions of American Authors. The Center had recently been lambasted by Edmund Wilson. In the next meeting of the MLA, the young radicals of the time came very close to persuading the MLA to withdraw its support to the Center. This action might well have cost the Center a rather large grant from the NEH. In short, the Center felt the need to mend its fences and to let a wider audience know what it was doing. Would I then be willing to serve on the Advisory Committee? My answer had to be that I was not a scientific bibliographer and was certainly unqualified.

"That is exactly the point," he told me. "We want you and Kathleen Coburn, who has been editing Coleridge's notebooks,<sup>3</sup> to serve on this committee to keep us honest and be able to report to people that we are not wasting money or wasting time. We want you two because though you have both done some ad-editing, you are not professional bibliographers and can be regarded as disinterested."

On that base, I said that I would be willing to serve. For I do think that this is important when you are dealing with a literary text to know as nearly as possible what the author wanted printed.

So I served three years on the committee. I don't think that I helped very much, but I did learn something for myself. I learned two things and I speak in no malicious spirit—perhaps I can name both of them. I found that scientific bibliographers tend to be a rather contentious lot. They guard their consciences like theologians. They are—and it is perfectly natural, granted their interests—precisionists and perfectionists. On the other hand, I also became convinced that they could make a case for their rigor. You are going to invest money in trying to get the job done precisely right, then it ought to be done as carefully and as scientifically as possible, for once it has been done then these texts can be produced by

photography and so any chance for textual error because of a faulty type setting or a meddling editor has been eliminated.

The plan is, as you may know, that when these texts have been checked over and worked out and established, they are not copyrighted. Thus, any commercial publisher who wants to use that correct text who will promise to reproduce the text photographically may do so. In principle then, it seems to be, that the enterprise was well worth doing.

So scientific bibliography is flourishing. If that is what you mean, my answer is, "Yes, I think of it as a value, but I don't ever want to do it myself. I am not temperamentally fitted for it, I would do the job poorly and in any case, I would soon go mad if I worked at it.

Q: Mr. Brooks, in approaching an introductory course in literature to pass on to undergraduates and in not having time to give to both practical criticism and scholarship, which would you give priority? To the practical criticism or to the scholarship?

CB: Well, I think that I would give in most instances priority to practical criticism, simply because one needs proficiency in reading literature as *literature* and not just as a document in the history of ideas or as the expression of a particular trauma in an author's life. I think that if literature has any value as such, it is that literary quality which is usually missed by the novice student. Why have him study Shakespeare's plays if all that he gets from them is a half dozen plot summaries?

Moreover, if one can get the student interested in reading literature, he may be able then to look up a good biography of Keats or of Whitman or whatever he needs to do to get the facts in the background. So, I would give certain priority to the practical criticism.

On the other hand, I admit that I am influenced by my own bias; after all, that is what I have devoted forty years of my life to. And, after all, I hate to feel that I have lived a completely misguided life.

Q: If I can pursue this a little further, the approach that has been under attack over the years would be the approach of making literature relevant to the student. In other words, of constructing his life in the perspective life—if he is going to be an Air Force officer, he may find himself in Hamlet's situation. What do you think of this approach? Is it over-criticized, or at least should it be avoided?

CB: Well, I am inclined to think the practical critic, if he is well-trained, will find himself trying to make the literature relevant in the proper sense of relevance. In other words, engaging the student's interest in works of



the imagination by stimulating the student's own imagination. If he succeeds, the matter of relevance will almost take care of itself. In general, this business of worrying too much about the relevance may actually miss what makes literature valuable, may make topical problems, a distraction. Some problems which seem now highly relevant may, ten years later, become dead issues. The student may not be interested in them anymore. If he can be taught to read, his own imagination will necessarily be engaged. Besides, he can then sort out for himself what is truly relevant.

Q: Where in the curriculum would you place an introduction to literature course if you had the opportunity to place it anywhere? Would you wait until students had basic composition or a how-to-read course, or would you postpone it and have it your senior year? Particularly if you can address this, would it make a difference, especially if many of the students go on to science, engineering, and other specialties?

CB: I think that the earlier the better. If the student really is so badly off in his ability to write and express himself and say a straight thing straight, I suppose you would rush there first with a writing course. Yet if you can work in a little literature, that is to the good. But once that more pressing consideration has been taken care of, then one ought to take up. An introduction to literature, for an important part of your job as a practical critic, is to get students reading. Once you get them truly interested in reading, there is some chance they will continue and can learn a great deal on their own. In short their further reading will in itself deepen their ability to read.

Circumstances may, of course, make it impossible to introduce the introduction to literature early. In that case, better late than never. Yet even the senior year may not be too late. A senior who has got through his basic concerns and requirements may be relaxed a bit and more receptive—able to absorb more than he would have if the course had been available. But I still say, the sooner the better.

Q: I think one of the obstacles that we all face is that the student just does not engage his own imagination, around here, especially—and I am wondering if it is true at Yale—is the same hurry. So many of our students say to us, "We think you are a fine person and this might be a good course, but my credits are legion. I owe so many debts." How do you overcome this? Our feeling is that you can't learn to read literature or even learn to appreciate it in a hurry.

CB: That is true, and I don't know of any way to remedy the situation. Such a situation usually reflects aspects of the society at large. We all hurry too much—and maybe it can't be helped. The play that I would try is this: "Look, it is important for you to get a degree. And if you are looking for a job or an advancement, I grant to you that it is important for you to make good marks rather to learn how to enjoy literature. But the ability to appreciate literature is not just a liking. You have the rest of your life to live. After you have this degree or even after you have secured your job and you read poorly or not at all, you will miss things that could keep you growing, keep you alive. That would be a permanent loss. Therefore try this course; even though you see that you cannot devote much time to it, it may be worthwhile to try to catch a glimpse of what great literature has in store. Then, maybe later on, you can pick it up yourself. Yet if you ask me if this particular ploy is successful with every student or even on many students, I have to admit it is not. A man who is really in a hurry is in a hurry, and he may hurry on past your advice or that of anyone else.

Q: Which poets in America in the twentieth century do you rate highest?

CB: That is a hard question, a good question because a good deal of my lifetime is gone and has gone in reading and trying to learn how to talk about the poets that I either grew up with or who were interesting to me when I was younger. The result is, I would be the first to say, that I am not nearly as well acquainted with the poets of the 50's and 60's as I ought to be. I wish I knew them better. Now that my second Faulkner book is finished, I am planning to do a good deal more reading of some of the more recent novelists and poets. I try to keep up but I am sure that I have not read enough in Ashbery, for example, to be able to give a confident appraisal. So the people that are going to seem significant to me are the people who emerged, really in the 1920's, 30's, and 40's.

I still think that Yeats is the great poet of the twentieth century. There is a strong countercurrent against him now, being pushed vigorously in certain quarters. I think Eliot is a powerful figure, and again there is a great strong reaction against him, something to be expected. Just possibly it is a proper correction though I don't think that it is.

I myself cannot become absorbed in Pound though, to my complete surprise, his reputation now is becoming greater and greater. I cannot understand it. For perfectly proper reasons it seems to me that a person who made as many political mistakes as he made, whose record on anti-Semitism and things of that sort is in doubt, that he would reap liberal, revolutionary readers. But astonishingly many of just these people applaud him. Perhaps they are just trying to do justice to him. At

any rate it is to their credit that they are not condemning his poetry simply because of his politics. One of my former students has reproached me in print for not giving Pound his due. I do see Pound as the author of a great deal of very wonderful *poetry* but not many good *poems*. The distinction I am making here is a fairly simple one. For I agree with Aristotle that a truly complete poem has a beginning, a middle, and an end. I can't find that structure in the *Cantos*. I can find two lines, twenty lines, fifty consecutive lines, in which the imagery and rhythm are meaningful and expressive. Anyway, my view on Pound could be completely wrong. I find him a tremendously important figure in the literature of the age because he influenced so many and was so helpful to so many; he was the great writing master of his time; and he even, you know, steered his elder W. B. Yeats into the twentieth century. He has reason to claim that and much more as a great man of letters.

I think that Wallace Stevens is a very fine poet, but I find him a little monotonous. I think that he has one great theme and he expresses it beautifully and subtly, but I can't be as enamored of him as a great many people are, like my young colleague Harold Bloom at Yale. Maybe Bloom is right here and I am wrong.

I think that my old friend Robert Penn Warren—and I speak of course with all the prejudice of a friend—has written some very fine poetry, and is writing better poetry than he has ever written now that he has got into his seventies and I am not alone in saying this. A great many people say it. I put W. H. Auden very high. I never really—although I have known Auden for many years, personally—was ever close to him. I found that there was always some kind of barrier between us, though we called each other by our first names for many years before his death. We shared many views on religion, literature, and a great many other things but I found him a difficult person. On the other hand, as a poet when he is good, he is very very good and I put him down as one of our great poets.

I think that Archibald MacLeish has done some beautiful poems. What an ear he has and how he can handle imagery. He has written some very beautiful lyrics. And so I could go on. My list would not be particularly odd or strange—indeed rather predictable. I hope that if you ask me two years hence, I will be able to give a better account of the poets of the 50's and 60's.

Q: There are two distinct omissions from your list that come to mind: Frost obviously, and Thomas Hardy.

CB: I am glad that you have mentioned both of them because I would hate to look back at a sleepless hour of 3 o'clock and recall that I had

omitted their names. I don't think that Frost is a great poet, but I think he is a very good. He has been damaged by his friends who have tried to turn him into a cozy old New England crackerbarrel philosopher, exuding homely wisdom. I think Frost has wisdom but he is also a great artist, and I think that his best work is extremely good.

I think that Hardy is a very great poet at his best. I think that Eliot got him exactly right when he said in effect, "Hardy is a man who often reaches the heights of the sublime without ever first going through the stage of being just good." Some of Hardy's poetry is just awful bungling but some of the rest is truly wonderful.

I ought to mention one or two other poets who are friends of mine and are very specialized poets. I think that John Crowe Ransom is a great minor poet if that doesn't sound like a contradiction of terms. He has a quality that absolutely nobody else has. I think that Allen Tate, though a crabbed and difficult poet, has written several quite wonderful poems. Of course, there are others I will think of later.

Q: You named Faulkner as a great American author of fiction. I certainly do not want to challenge that, but Dr. Stuart James<sup>4</sup> showed me a quote from Blotner's<sup>5</sup> book that Faulkner made himself late in his career to his girlfriend commenting on his own work. He said that I am amazed at how great that gift was and why the gods or God or whoever chose me. It's not an answer to the question, but I wondered if you could account for it.

CB: Yes, that is not one of Faulkner's more modest statements. He had a lot of pride, and he thought very well of himself, at least of his work, not really of himself. I think that sometimes he was mistaken about the quality of some of his novels. Some that he thought were the very best are simply not. But in general Faulkner was not a boastful man—and I think that the passage you have quoted is a cry of sheer wonderment. I believe in this instance he is saying, "Who am I to have done a piece of work as good as this?" He is here looking at his work in detachment, living a life of its own. He feels that he can look at it almost as an outsider could and is frankly astonished that "I did it." Surely, this is what Faulkner really means. And having in mind his four or five best novels, I think he is justified.

I think that these could excite anybody to a kind of admiration—and wondering surprise if we had written them. For curiously enough, none of them are really autobiographical. They are autobiographical only in the sense that everything that any author writes came out of his imagination and his experience. Faulkner's great gift was to be able to write these books in almost detachment from his own cravings, problems, and so on.

This, of course, is the great gift that Shakespeare had (though I am not claiming that Faulkner was of Shakespeare's stature). The dramatic imagination reveals itself in the ability to project oneself in character after character, characters that may be not in the least like the author.

I am now reading a manuscript on Faulkner in which the author is trying awfully hard to remake every character practically into Faulkner—projections of Faulkner. The writer truly has Faulkner on that Freudian couch.

Q: In view of your list, Mr. Brooks, where would you place authors such as Jean Toomer or Richard Wright or Langston Hughes who are admittedly often put in that nebulous genre we call Black Literature and who as teachers of the same are inclined to believe are excellent writers on the par with some of those you named?

CB: I don't know this work well enough, and I trust my judgment too little to make a confident assertion as to whether they are or not on a par with the writers that I named a moment ago. But I have no hesitation in saying that they are true artists and have each written at least one remarkable book.

One of the useful things that getting engaged in this long book with Warren and Dick Lewis<sup>6</sup> was that, whereas I am nowadays caught up with more recent American writers, writing the book with them caused me to read many of our earlier American authors, some of whom I did not know nearly well enough—Toomer would be one of them, for example. The experience was kind of an education for me because I got into American literature by slipping in through the kitchen door. I had just one quarter of formal training in American literature in my whole career. I still have some gaps not really filled or only partially filled. By working with Dick Lewis who is a very accomplished Americanist, I learned a great deal. Moreover, Warren, who has read everything and who is an amateur American literaturist, stimulated me to get more thoroughly acquainted with our 19th-century authors.

Q: If I could pursue this a little further, you mentioned Jean Toomer and I wondered how—as he is particularly interested in the South and came basically as a legacy to us—you would compare him to Faulkner who writes about the same South?

CB: I think that there is some overlap there. I think that Faulkner would have recognized it. I don't know that anywhere in Faulkner's letters or spoken comments, he ever refers to Toomer and I am not sure that he ever

read any Toomer though perhaps he did. Faulkner read a lot of things. I think he would have recognized that both he and Toomer were writing about Man—the same basic human creature, in all of his humanity. Moreover, Faulkner early recognized that the Black man in the South shared a great deal of the culture of the South—that he rightly felt was his culture and that he had his own contributions to make to it. Faulkner was very interested in the Blacks. He has one of his characters say, “I wouldn’t dare try to get inside the Black man’s skin, to speak for him” and in his interviews with the students of the University of Virginia, he made pretty much the same point. This does not mean that Faulkner did not write about Black people; he did. Sometimes he wrote about them not as well as at other times, but often I think he wrote about them very well. On the whole he was rather chary about claiming to speak for Black people. His is frankly a view from the outside, though nonetheless worth having.

Q How did you get started on your Faulkner books?

CB: I started off writing a book on Faulkner because I got interested in it while trying to teach a few of his novels in a graduate course at Yale during the late 40’s and 50’s. Later somebody, I think Monroe Spears in the *Sewanee Review*, announced that I was writing a book on Faulkner.<sup>7</sup> I hadn’t planned to, but it made me think that maybe I ought to write such a book because I had become interested in locating the stumbling blocks that got in the way of Yale graduate students when they tried to read Faulkner. Very able, very intelligent, and very well-read they were. They hailed from all over the country and from Europe, but they had their difficulties with him. I got interested in the character of their typical difficulties. So I began my book. Then, later on I told the head of the Yale Press that it was going to become two volumes because I could not get all I wanted to say into one. By 1961 I had the first volume nearly ready or could make it ready rather quickly. Would the press be willing to publish the one volume and wait a while for the companion volume. The director generously said yes and as a matter of fact the preface of the 1963 volume does announce that there will be a companion volume.

I decided that my first volume would deal with the Yoknapatawpha novels. That is what I had been teaching and that is what I was ready to write on.

This way of organizing the first volume left me with what some people would regard as a rather awkward format. When the second volume was ready for writing, I thought for a while of changing it but friends persuaded me to go on and keep the first volume as it was. So the other

book then had to include everything else that wasn't treated in the first, which made it a rather mixed bag.

This second volume is to be published as a volume that begins with Faulkner's early efforts to write poetry, his verse play, some early romantic prose, some of the early short stores, the *New Orleans Sketches*, his first novel, his second novel, and then I deal with *Flags in the Dust*. *Flags in the Dust* was originally published in a shortened and revised form in 1929 under the title of *Sartoris*. I discussed *Sartoris* in my first volume and so I let *Flags in the Dust* serve as a kind of link between the two volumes. Then the rest of my volume two, the remaining third, simply becomes chapters on the three novels that Faulkner later wrote, novels in which he goes outside his famous county, sometimes with unhappy results: *Pylon*, *The Wild Palms*, and *A Fable*. There is a last chapter on Faulkner's views on time and history.

I have taken care to supply an extra table of contents which lists the chapters of the two books in more or less chronological order. Anybody, therefore, who wants to read the chapters of the two volumes in chronological order may do so. To return for a moment to the second volume: the fact that the works to be discussed in it are not really of first-rate quality raises special problems. How to keep your reader interested? I attempted to do so by shifting the interest to Faulkner's growth as a literary artist—how his big themes developed, how early they emerge in his work, what he borrowed from Eliot and Joyce. I have even included some long notes (at the back of the volume) in which I tabulate Faulkner's echoes from Housman, from Joyce, and many others. I have included a variety of other notes, which deal with matters that I believed did not deserve a place in the text proper.

In my first volume,<sup>8</sup> I also relegated a good deal of subsidiary material to notes printed at the back of the volume. For example, with reference to *As I Lay Dying*, I appended a note on homemade coffins of the kind that Cash makes for his mother. In an earlier day many poorer families made their own coffins. In my second volume, I have thought it necessary to add a note on a curious passage in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. That novel tells how a young medical intern runs off with a married woman who abandons her husband and two children. They resolve to live a perpetual honeymoon. They will defy society and try to live on love. They have little money and finally the intern loses his job. But when he tells his paramour that he has lost it, she accepts the news almost gaily and tells him to get his hat, for they will go out and celebrate the occasion: She tells him that she had planned to cook chops for their dinner. She now takes the chops out of the refrigerator, get a bottle of liquor and they go out to a bar. On their way they run into a newspaper friend of theirs who

has with him other friends and soon seven of them sit down at a table to drink. The woman keeps talking about a dog. Let's drink to the dog, she says. They even set an eighth place at the table and set a tumbler of bourbon there—no, sorry, they have the uncooked chops there. Then, finally, as they get deeper into drink, they decide to go out and find a proper dog. Some four or five of the party get into a taxi cab, still carrying with them the chops. They drive clear out to Evanston and sure enough they discover in a front yard one of these great cast iron dogs, a St. Bernard, life-size. So the woman goes out and lays the chops as an offering in front of the dog and they all go home. Does the episode make any sense at all?

Well, one way to deal with it is to say that the lovers celebrating felt that their proper response to the loss of the job and livelihood was to say: all right, we won't eat anymore. The hell with eating. We'll drink and be merry. That, of course, is the basic sense of the incident. But why the dog? This is the sort of question that teases the interested reader. A conscientious author tries to answer if he can. As I thought about the passage I remembered—you are all probably too young to remember it—a stupid story which went the rounds about the time Faulkner was writing *The Wild Palms*. A man goes into what was probably one of these restaurants where wine and spirits are sold only if the customer also orders food. One can't just go in and ask for a highball. So the man wanting a drink goes in and gives his order to the waiter: "Bring me a bottle of bourbon, a steak cooked bloody rare—in fact don't cook it at all—and a bulldog." "But, sir, why do you want a bulldog?" "To eat the steak, damn it!" Well, it is a poor enough story, but I guess people could get drunk enough to find it funny. In any case, this story provides the only way I can find to account for the elaborate ritual involving the chops, the dog and finally presenting the chops to the iron dog.

There is a sequel to my note on *The Wild Palms*. I was teaching as a visiting professor at Tulane University two winters ago, and we leased a house from a Tulane professor on leave. The house was on Lowerline Street, and soon after we moved in, I remember looking across the street and seeing a big dog in the fenced yard. I kept looking and looking, and waiting for the dog to move. Finally it occurred to me that the dog was not live but a statue. Later we were asked to come over and have a drink and I found that the dog was an iron St. Bernard, fully life-size, and our hosts told about why it had been made. The owner of a favorite dog had had a cast statue made of it. The cast-iron dog I was looking at was either the original statue or a copy of it. Incidentally the iron dog I was looking at fit perfectly the description given by Faulkner in the novel. Its head indeed wore an expression somewhere between that of Franz Joseph, Emperor of



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the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and a state of Maine banker of 1859. It had that kind of inflexible dignity. While in New Orleans, did Faulkner ever see the iron dog I was looking at? I don't know. Anyway, I think I know what Faulkner had in mind when he described the iron dog in Evanston, Illinois.

Comment: I am reluctant to bring this to an end, but Professor Brooks has had a very hectic schedule today and will continue this evening and a full day tomorrow. And as I speak for all of us in thanking you for sharing with us your observations of the world of letters we sometimes profess and sometimes reluctantly profess, I suppose—one final question, maybe. Let's call it quits for the day.

CB: Well, let me express my thanks to those of you who have done me the kindness and honor of coming out to sit and address questions to me. They were good questions. And I must warn you, don't take too seriously my answers.

**APRIL 12, 1978**



*Mr. Brooks with freshman honors English cadets and members of the English Department.*

### ENGLISH 111H CLASS

*Mr. Brooks met in the morning with a class of freshman honor students, who asked the following questions.*

Introduction: We're gathered to hear and to share some ideas with Professor Cleanth Brooks, Professor Emeritus from Yale, a formidable American scholar who has written widely on English and American literature. He is a specialist on the writings of William Faulkner; some of you may remember the short stories "That Evening Sun" and "Wash." Professor Brooks is visiting the Academy for three days and will be speaking to the Cadet Wing tonight. I think you will find him a very astute observer of what's happening to language in this country and to the kinds of problems students face in confronting the rich heritage of English and American letters. Mr. Brooks.

CB: Well, it's a pleasure to be here. I hope that for you also it's going to prove not unpleasant for us to chat together, and I hope that you'll be persuaded to put up some questions about Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor or about the state of the English language or whatever may occur to you.

At the moment I'm very much steamed up on Faulkner because I have a new book on Faulkner to be released the 19th of this month (April), and I was very much interested to hear that some of you have been reading "That Evening Sun." I think it is one of Faulkner's most accomplished short stories. One of the most interesting things about it is the technique that he uses, having the story told by Quentin. Does anyone remember how old Quentin is at this time? He's a boy, we know, but how old is he when the story takes place? All right?

Q: Twelve.

CB: I think it's nine, but I'd have to look back. I'm not sure. His little sister is considerably younger—five, perhaps, maybe it's seven. The technique used in the story is what I would call a "bank shot." You know that in billiards, you sometimes have to bank the cue ball off the rail to make it strike the ball that you need to hit. The young and innocent child Quentin tells the story—tells it without fully realizing what he is telling. The full impact of the story, nevertheless, registers on the adult reader. Quentin is the "rail" which the cue ball strikes first before it rebounds to make a direct collision with our sensibilities. It's perfectly true that Quentin gets some glimmer of the real meaning. But not all. His little sister Caddy doesn't get any. She's the one who keeps asking the innocent questions. But the story registers a much more powerful effect, it seems to me, just because the real story, the real drama, the real pathos is being bounced off this innocent observer to us. The method really amounts to a mode of intense understatement.

By the way, what does the title, "That Evening Sun" mean? Did anybody inquire? Faulkner titles often don't make much sense. I'll be the first to say that. He's got titles the import of which I can't possibly understand. But this one is fairly obvious. Surely, somebody can guess what "That Evening Sun" comes from. Well, a younger generation would have been familiar with the song called "The Saint Louis Blues." I think it goes "I hates to see that evening sun go down." That evening sun. And Nancy is the one that hates that evening sun to go down. Why?

Q: Because Jesus is coming around.

CB: That's right. Because her estranged husband is coming back and coming back with a razor to exercise condign punishment on her for her adultery. But actually it's even a little more special than that. It's not just that it's Jesus coming back, but do you remember she tells Mr. Compson when he discovers that the children are not home and goes down to Nancy's cabin to bring them back. And he tells Nancy: look why don't you let me call the police. Jesus is not here; so why don't you go lock up your house and we'll take you on to Aunt Rachel's—who has offered to take her in for the night. And Nancy, you remember, says no. It won't do no good. Even if I was in your own kitchen, Nancy tells Mr. Compson, it wouldn't do no good. I know he's there. Finally, in despair, because Mr. Compson honestly thinks it's a delusion in the woman's mind, he says well, I wish you would let me do something. And what does Nancy say? "Ain't nothing you can do. I just hates for it to happen in the dark." And

that's where the title "that evening sun" comes in.

Nancy knows she's going to die; she's even reconciled to dying. She just hates for it to happen in the dark. Notice the brilliant way in which Faulkner has ended the story. There's Mr. Compson who honestly believes Nancy is under a delusion, walking back up the lane with the children, the smallest one on his shoulders, and the last that we see—the last that Quentin, the little boy, remembers of the scene—is not Nancy's door barred against Jesus, but the door open, Nancy sitting there, and the lamp turned just as high as Nancy can turn it. Why? Because she hates for it to happen in the dark. I think it's a very brilliant story. I hope you feel that way.

Are there some questions about the story—maybe I can answer them, maybe not—that some of you would like to put?

Q: One of the questions that emerged when we were discussing this story was the significance of the name of Nancy's husband. Would you care to comment about that?

CB: Yes. The fact that he is called Jesus, something that will sound odd to most of us though Col Shuttleworth was just saying to me that he has it on good authority that among the Black folk of the period, this was a name not uncommon. It's certainly not uncommon south of the border in Mexico. There, it's perfectly all right, just as we would not hesitate to name a girl Mary, they would name a boy, Jesus. But it makes for a very wonderful *double entendre* because as the little girl Caddy keeps asking who is Jesus. One gets an ironic play on the name: Jesus the Savior, Jesus of Nazareth, who represents salvation and this other Jesus who, for Nancy, represents a gruesome death. Does Nancy feel any guilt, would you say? Is Nancy still in love with Jesus even though she's terrified of him? Well, read the story again. I think you'll find it very interesting to note what her attitude toward him is.

Well, is that enough pump priming? Wouldn't you like to put a question about that story or some other story?

Q: Do you think if she had really loved Jesus, she would have left him? She wouldn't have considered him such a threat? And if she didn't love him, there's nothing to say for her?

CB: It's a good question, and there isn't any easy answer. All that I would want to point to, which is why I've asked that question, is this: when Mr. Compson is trying to put fear out of Nancy's mind, and says Jesus is gone somewhere and is probably up in St. Louis and he's

probably got another wife, what is it that Nancy says? Well, she says, he'd better not have. If I could see her, I would whop her this way and I would whop her that way. Nancy still has a sense of possession. Jesus belongs to her. And that fierce possessiveness—it may be a very complicated kind of love—makes her feel guilty in having betrayed him. She even feels that he has a right to punish her for what she's done. What about Mrs. Compson? What kind of person is she? Yes.

Q: There's a lot of tension between her and Nancy.

CB: That's right. She is whining, neurotic woman who really isn't a mother, who has no compassion, who can't understand Nancy's trouble, who can't sympathize with her. Some of you who go on to read *The Sound and the Fury*, which is one of Faulkner's great novels, will discover Faulkner suggests that what is primarily the matter with the Compson household is this whining, neurotic, selfish woman. Nor does her husband help matters very much. He cannot cope with the situation. He has become cynical and defeatist. He is drinking more bourbon whiskey than is good for him—or for his family. This is what makes the family cave in and break down. Anybody else have a comment—if you don't have a question?

Comment: Some of the other classes have read "Wash." I don't know if you heard that comment earlier.

CB: Yes, I did.

Comment: Perhaps some of them have a question about it.

CB: Yes, maybe so.

Comment: Mr. Brooks, one comment about both "Wash" and "That Evening Sun" is Faulkner and the community, his dealing with the community because it helps us understand the Compsons, perhaps and their reaction to Nancy in the story.

CB: I have made the point in an earlier book on Faulkner, a book published way back in 1963. There I insisted that for Faulkner the community is terribly important. In pushing that issue, I got in trouble with a good many of the reviewers. They thought that I meant by a "community" a group of fine, wholesome delightful people, all of whom had the proper standards of thought and conduct. That was not what I was

talking about at all. The community of Jefferson is a group of people who have their own hates, fears, adamant versions, as well as loves and loyalties. They have their own prejudices and bigotries. All of that has got to be conceded. But they are a community, nevertheless. They care about each other. They are tied together by bonds that make them one cohesive group of people. Faulkner's novels and his short stories very frequently see the community as a real force. His rebels have something to rebel against. More than that, Faulkner is constantly posing a community still in being against the gray, faceless anonymity of the great world cities, where a person can live in an apartment house and never speak to the people down the hall—where many people feel isolated, cut off from his fellows, and up against a gray abstraction. In other words, a community is better than simply faceless anonymity, though obviously some communities are more compassionate and more civilized than others.

The poet W. H. Auden has given a very brilliant and, I think, useful distinction between a crowd, a society, and a community.<sup>9</sup> I think it's worth passing it on, because it is described as a good poet will do it, quite concretely. A *crowd* is a random collection of people. An accident occurs on a street corner, or a fight, and the people close around gather to look. They're drawn by a common motive, let's say. But they are not tied to each other in any way. It is simply a random aggregation of people. A *society* is not a random aggregation of people. It is a group of people who are organized along political and economic lines: so many shoemakers, so many delivery men, so many doctors, so many lawyers, so many clergymen, so many garbage collectors, and so on. They are a working, economic society. How does a society differ from a community? Well, the *community* is a society in which its members regard one another as people, actual concrete, individual persons. Again, let me repeat: a community is not necessarily without guile or without prejudices, but its members do care about each other. This common concern can become oppressive as anyone who has lived in a small town knows. People do gossip over the back fence. One may resent a place in which everybody wants to know his business. That's the bad side of it. On the other hand, there's a good side too. The way people in a true community rally around the person who is in trouble.

A psychiatrist at Yale gave me one of the best definitions of a community when he remarked that in a community people care about each other. In most of his Yoknapatawpha novels and short stories, Faulkner writes about a community in being. Wash is a man who is hanging on the outer fringes of the community. He is a poor white, a down-at-heels,—certainly not an outstanding member of the community and I am sure most of the community looks down on him. His great tie, as



you who have read the story will remember, is the fact that he regards Thomas Sutpen as his true friend. Thomas Sutpen is for him, the brave man; Sutpen was elected colonel in the local regiment that served during the Civil War. He had fought bravely.

Yet, when you look closely at Thomas Sutpen, you'll find that even he is on the fringes of the community, too. People don't quite know what to make of him. And if you read the great novel—I think Faulkner's, greatest—*Absalom, Absalom!*, you find out a great deal about how slim were the ties between Sutpen and the community.

He held his neighbors at arm's length, and they tended to hold him at arm's length. Anyway, I take it that in "Wash" the crux of the story is this poor white's looking up to the man he regards as the great brave man, and the man of substance, the great landowner. Then having trusted him all the way, Wash experiences the anguish of feeling betrayed by him. At the end, pushed to the brink of despair, he gets out his rusty scythe and cuts Sutpen down. Some of you who have read "Wash" as a short story might very well one of these days get out and read *Absalom, Absalom!*, because Faulkner took the story of "Wash" and absorbed it, rewriting it into the larger novel.

Q: You might address a question like this: For young people who are going to be leading their adult lives at least half the time in the twenty-first century, in a society in which one-fourth of the population moves out of whatever community it belongs to every year, in a society which is dominated by visual media, why should anybody read Faulkner and what does he have to say to us anyway?

CB: That's a good question because to an old fogey like me, the whole idea is appalling—what the twenty-first century is going to be—where our communities in being are probably dissolved completely—where people maybe, for all I know, cease to read altogether—everything be done simply in terms of oral communication or watching the television screen. Yet, the question's a good one. Why should a person in that era, find any importance whatsoever in reading something that will seem dated, dated, dated? The dated quality is the very point.

Consider, for example, *Absalom, Absalom!*. It's a story, most of which occurs back in the times of the Civil War, a hundred years ago. Even those events that come later, in the early years of our own century are already dated for us. Why read it then? I suppose that there are at least two good reasons for my doing so. Let me state the weaker one first: to escape. People may find that the twenty-first century is a little hard on the nerves at times; it may be interesting to get away into another era, one

which is different and therefore restful. In fact, the last years I was Yale I taught an undergraduate course in Faulkner and I think only perhaps 15% of the class, if that many, were southerners. For most of the class the world of Yoknapatawpha as described by Faulkner was a completely bizarre world. Its customs, speech, pronunciation, style of life, and the values in which it believed were different. The interesting thing—and I could not believe it until I experienced it over a period of five years—was this: these bright, alert, vigorous, interesting young people who were going to move into the twenty-first century with you and probably dominate it simply couldn't get enough of Faulkner. Why? Because that world had some values which they were missing in their own. They got terribly interested in Faulkner's worlds. Part of Faulkner's attraction may have been escapism, for we do all kinds of escapist reading, reading about King Arthur or looking ahead the other way, viewing pictures like *Star Wars*. Yet escapism, I am convinced, was the smallest part.

A much better reason for reading Faulkner in the twenty-first century, or for reading Shakespeare or even Chaucer at the present time is this: unless one knows something about the past, one lives in a very thin dimension of time. One knows only his own world and his own time. That is to experience a fairly narrow and confining world.

It is far more exciting to live in a long vertical dimension so that you can become acquainted with Man in all his different civilizations. This is one of the reasons why it is so refreshing and strengthening to read Homer. One finds that essentially man hasn't changed so much in 2500 years. You discover what is basically the same motivations, the same aspirations, the same virtues, and the same vices are there. Many of the great stories are timeless even though they are actually dated to a particular era. And to be able to live in a three-dimensional world in which you are a citizen of the various ages is a very strengthening and heartening thing. It is much better rather than to be condemned to occupy one little narrow cell of human history of time.

I think that would be the shortest, most concise way I could put it. Obviously, you could write a book about Man as timeless and the business of literature's teaching us who we are and allowing us see each other against the great background of history. I believe it was Santayana, the philosopher,—or was it Santayana?—who said that you'd better learn history, those who don't know anything about history are condemned to repeat it, including its mistakes. History is not only rich, colorful, and interesting, but we can learn from it. And one of the ways in which literature is so helpful is that it makes the past come alive. It often makes it come alive in a much more vivid way than, let's say, many a historian does. For the writer, if he's a truly good writer, is using his imagination

and is engaging his reader's imagination so as to induce his reader to participate in, and become part of, the story. I'm afraid that's a rather long-winded answer, but then it's tempting to talk at some length about something one feels is very important.

Q: If man is timeless, then isn't his literature timeless too?

CB: Yes. I think it is.

Q: Wouldn't you say then, that the threat of the mass media is just that: a threat, a set back to literature, that is, we're not really threatened in the future or threatened going into the twentieth century [sic] of losing any of that due to television or radio?

CB: Well, our participation in literature is not threatened absolutely. Let's be common sensical about that problem. I can always turn off my television when it's a stupid "sit-com."<sup>10</sup> (I've seen the general story presented over and over before. I can even predict everything that's going to happen anyway.) I can turn the TV off. I'm certainly not condemning the instrument as such. I actually own one. It has its value, but I would hate to be so thoroughly numbed by watching television—so conditional and even intoxicated by it, that because of such addiction I never opened a book. I won't say that a TV diet is just garbage; yet many of the programs are not much better than excelsior, a kind of processed stuff that contains almost no mental nourishment. But if human beings do keep their totality as human beings, if they keep their imaginations fresh and strong, and their senses alive and alert, their minds functioning, passage into the twenty-first century is not going to threaten the whole population. Even if most people by that time have given up reading because it requires too much effort, some one will probably be smuggling in books.

Nevertheless, there is such a thing as being brought up on such poor mental nourishment so that other more nutritious sorts lose their appeal. Taste can be so debased that it rejects what is good. I think the threat of the mass media is precisely here. In fact, one of the reasons I hope you're attending an institution like this is that you're not only learning technology which, of course, is terribly important, and particularly important in your case, but you're learning how to be alive in the other departments—those that have to do with the total human being. The person who has fully developed himself can function as a technologist and still live in a timeless world. He can do so whatever CBS is doing, or ABC, or whatever the latest pop writers are producing. So your question is a perfectly apt one.

On the other hand, if one is spiritually malnourished and so suffering from spiritual malnutrition, he may not be able to carry out the strenuous exercise of the imagination which all great literature demands. I hope that's a proper answer, a partial answer at least.

Q: Will literature be forced to adapt to keep the attention of its audience?

CB: Yes, I think it will, and it's already adapting.

Q: Is it sacrificing something in its adaptation?

CB: Not necessarily. Faulkner had to adapt. Our best novelists today are adapting to present conditions. My friend, Robert Penn Warren, the poet and novelist is already adapting to the circumstances of our time. I'm not worried that this country won't continue to produce first-rate literary artists, who in their works of the imagination can cope with the modern world with its problems and with its special condition. What worries me is the possible quality of future audiences because you can have some very great authors and yet at the same time have some mighty poor audiences, audiences which do not know the good authors, don't want to know them, or won't read them. That's a problem.

In other words, to be brief about it, we have had good writers and able men who have lived in all the past periods that we can think of. But some of our past periods of civilization have needed a higher peak than have others. I can imagine a future period—even in the twenty-first century perhaps—in which the literature was at a pretty low ebb, largely because there wasn't enough interested and intelligent readers to read and appreciate such able writers as were produced.

Q: So, what you're saying is that if this does occur, it will be in stages and won't happen all at once and won't shut down literature for good?

CB: I think that one of the things one learns—at least by my age, and I ought to have learned it earlier—is that it is very hard to predict the future. When one looks back to the twentieth century and sees how many predictions confidentially made by newspaper columnists, philosophers, historians, and political scientists have proved absolutely wrong. So I won't try to predict it. All I can say at that point is that if we extrapolate some of our present-day tendencies, the situation looks rather ominous. But who knows? After I'm long under the sod, some of you may be rejoicing that you've entered the great promised land, the wonderful century ahead. Let's hope that this is what will actually happen.

On the other hand, it's possible that it won't be that kind of century at all. Though all of us hope to save the civilization, we also want to save ourself. Even if you found that you were living in a period which was pretty barren of those things that have for long been held in great value through most of the past, you'd like to hold on to them as much as possible. Even if the mass audience in the twenty-first century gave up reading, I hope that some of you could continue to need the great books.

I'm tempted at this point to say a few words about the able concept of progress. Progress—automatic and inevitable progress—is the great article of faith to which most Americans subscribe. They imbibe it with our mothers' milk. But one needs to remember that it is possible to have incontestable progress in certain fields and yet to regress in still others. I grant that it's very hard for us to contemplate anything so pessimistic as a world which doesn't automatically get bigger and better in every generation. But look back at the twentieth century. The thinkers in the first part of the twentieth century heralded it as an age of peace and prosperity. The sciences were moving ahead, mankind was coming together, in a unity of culture; mankind was going to be a great breakthrough into a fine peaceful and prosperous universal civilization. But in this century we have fought two of the bloodiest wars that have ever been fought in human history in terms of the number of people killed. We've also fought several smaller though not inconsequential wars. Let's hope that we are out of the woods, but who would dare be sure?

Q: You spoke of the fear that in the future we could have great authors and a poor audience. Is there a chance that the authors who come out in the future, would be fewer and of less quality?

CB: That is possible, too. If you look back and take a long view of English history, you have such a situation as occurs in the fifteenth century. The fourteenth century in English literature was really very good. Though there were not many people who could read and write, there are some very great writers who survived, poets like Chaucer. The sixteenth century—an enormously great period—produced wonderful literature. But if you look at the fifteenth century, just between these productive eras, was a very barren period indeed. I know it because at Oxford I had to study the literature of the fifteenth century, and I found that I the reader felt like the proverbial donkey on a concrete pasture. Except for historical things, there wasn't much literature there worth reading.

I don't think anybody quite knows why literature then went to pot. The

century, to be sure, had some writers, but they are awfully dull. We do know that England was in this period convulsed by the Wars of the Roses, that the land was in disorder, and this probably had something to do with it though there was a great deal of disorder in the fourteenth century too and also in the sixteenth century. Besides, a great quantity of literary work did get written in the fifteenth century. The problem is its quality. These things can happen. I'm not predicting that the twenty-first century is going to be barren of great authors. All I'm saying is that we have to entertain the possibility.

Q: How would you rate the twentieth-century authors?

CB: I think the twentieth century—I hope I'm not speaking out of parochial pride—has been a very great century in literature. I think it has probably been far better than its audiences deserve. I won't try to do a roll call of them, our great authors. I can't claim that I am entitled to say this one belongs on the list or that one does not. But I shall name a few names. I think that Hemingway is a severely limited author, but within his selected limits, superb. Really quite wonderful. I think that Frost—whether he is a great poet or not—is a very solid poet, an enduring poet, and a great literary artist. I've already spoken of Faulkner. One could go on. We've had a great array, particularly in the United States. We've had some great figures in England, too, in the twentieth century. So I'm not down-playing our own day just to set up the glories of the past. Far from it. I hope I'm talking along lines that you want me to talk about.

Q: You were talking about mass media and losing your imagination—would you comment on the movies today? Is there anything along those lines that make movies better than they use to be? That many of them are great works?

CB: I think that some of them are very fine; I think that the cinema is potentially a very great art form. There have been some very great movies made. I recently saw what I thought was—I won't say a great movie—an extremely good one, *The Turning Point*. I thought it was really a very able job. I think we're getting some good movies; I think we're also getting a vast amount of trash. This is in the nature of the thing.

Q: Sir, doesn't the same thing occur in literature?

CB: Yes, it does. Look at the best seller list in fiction as published by the *New York Times* every Sunday. And if you have any sense of what

literature can be and ought to be, frequently the list makes your flesh crawl. But if one wants to say that selling is the only thing, well we evidently have a lot of great authors, because we have certainly found people who can please the public.

One way to get at the problem is this: mass production is splendid for a great many things. We have found this is the best way to make automobiles, refrigerators, and jet planes. It has put in the people's hands useful articles that they would not have been able to afford if they had to be expensive handcrafted merchandise. On the other hand, one kind of artifact that always suffers by being mass produced is literature. A novel really has to be hand-tailored, handcrafted. A good piece of literature is really put together like a household clock. A poem or novel reveals one man's vision, his grasp of the language, his ability to dramatize some basic human issue. So mass-produced literature, by the very nature, is likely to be pretty thin stuff and pretty poor stuff. I'm not going to jump to the other extreme and to say that anything handcrafted is bound to be good. Some of it is surely not. But almost any piece of good literature is probably going to be the product of a sensitive craftsman's imagination and articulation. And that is why when one says that this or that novel is mass produced, he's already—more or less—rendered judgment on it.

I remember trying to make this point to a class at Louisiana State University long ago. I tried the following ploy once and got by with it. On my way to class I stopped by a magazine stand and picked up a copy of *True Confessions*—I think that was the magazine, or some such—and showed the class the magazine. I asked one of them to pick out a story. I said just pick one out from the illustrations or the title. Then I said to read the story aloud. So I read the first two paragraphs and then said, well there's no need in reading any further. When the class protested that we had just got started, I explained that we could predict the plot. I said I know exactly what's going to happen; we can even describe the principal characters that will appear. And so I did—successfully as it turned out. I took my chance because I was having to play fair. I really hadn't read the story before. We went on to read the rest of the story and it all came out exactly as I had said it would. It proved my point—that really this typical story was prefab stuff. If you read a little of it, you can predict the rest, whereas as one of my friends once remarked, anytime you read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, you always think *Macbeth* is going to win. Maybe you've read the play fifteen times before but when you get into that first act, you believe all over again that he's going to triumph. The play keeps its excitement—keeps its interest.

Q: Sir, are you trying to say that maybe the topics are a little bit worn

out?

CB: No, it's not quite that, because there are a limited number of topics and a limited number of situations that any writer can use. Somebody once worked them out and found that there are precisely thirty-eight possible story plots. That sounds crazy to me. How does he know? Yet, maybe there are just thirty-eight. But it doesn't matter if there are really seventy-eight, for, in any case, there is a limited number of plots. Originality in literature is not getting a new idea for a novel or a new situation, or even a new character. It's a much more subtle thing than that, and I suppose that several things are involved in creative writing. Great creative writing is a mystery. I think everybody has to admit that it's a mystery; we can't penetrate it. But we can see that it requires a firm grasp on a live language, and some sense of human nature, basic human nature. It involves a sense of human values, the basic values by which, so far as we can tell, men have lived ever since records have been kept. And the man who can use that kind of material and give us something fresh, something that spurs our own imagination, he is the man that has written a great novel or drama or poem.

I started to say I am unhappy to sense a little current of resistance running through your questions. But I really feel happy about it. Why do I say I'm happy about it? Because nobody wants to fight a soft pillow. If I'm saying anything that you can take with any seriousness, your minds are likely to question it, to ask whether it's really true. In short, I am pleased to sense in your comments and questions a certain resistance to full acceptance. Your questions have been good.

If I am correct in detecting in them any current of resistance, then if there is resistance, that's fine. Let's have some more of them. All right.

Q: Sir, I think everybody will admit that we communicate more than we ever have through mass media—newspapers, magazines—but do we communicate any better?

CB: No, I don't think we do.

Q: My impression from reading stuff written in the early nineteenth century, seventeenth century, and further back, is that people communicated a whole thought better than we do right now, that we work so much in bits and pieces that we're always misunderstanding each other.

CB: That's a very good point, though to put it as you do may be a bit



simplistic.

I'm sure that we have today some people who are able to communicate very well—instances of a whole man speaking to a whole man who listens and comprehends with full understanding. But I would agree with you that many of us do not express ourselves well, many do not listen well or read well, and that in our day the English language is poorly used and often misused. Our wonderful instruments of communication: I think what Shakespeare would make of a telephone particularly when he was told that by means of it he could talk to somebody across the Atlantic. Our electronic devices are indeed wonderful, but of course the finest machine in the world is no better than the person who's using it. If you talk nonsense over a radio transmitter, you get nonsense coming out the other end. If you tell a lie over the telephone, a lie it remains.

The real problem of communication, therefore, is finally an articulation of something worth saying. That is what is important. Now, we need our telephones, we need our television circuits, but communication, if it really means something, is not just idle chatter or and obscure ramblings. Meaningless words are still meaningless even when conveyed by satellite transmission.

Q: We're in an age where expressions like "Wow, man," like "You know" pass for communication. In two minutes, what can you say to young writers who are trying to find their own voices, trying to develop their own skills, trying to develop their own ability to express themselves? What advice do you suggest?

CB: I'm not sure my advice will be worth anything for I don't pretend to be a literary artist—which is probably what you have in mind when you just used the term "writer." I am primarily a teacher and my own writing is of a rather special and restricted kind. But my questioner is already on the right track if he can protest against the empty banalities of such expressions as "Wow man" and "You know" as most often used doesn't even mean what it literally says. The speaker doesn't really believe that his auditor knows what he is trying to tell him. "You know" is really a cry for help, or a cry of frustration. The person who has to say "you know" five times in two sentences is really saying I hope you already know, for I can't say what I mean, but maybe you'll guess it anyway from my facial expression and tone of voice. Facial expression and tone of voice are important, but the true literary artist, or just the person who wants to write a decent letter wants to get that tone of voice into the written word itself. He wants to get the thought to be conveyed into a concise, lucid sequence of prose. You are quite right in your

account of our present state of affairs. Too many of us speak and write poorly. Often we find ourselves merely jabbering at each other. Fortunately, we do not have to leave matters at that. The great English language isn't there to be appropriated, to be used. And to prove that fact, we have some very fine young writers, coming right along. The old language keeps renewing itself, thank goodness. We can't wear it out. We can misuse it, however, or fail to use it if we say, "you know, you know, you know" all the time, or if we speak and write technical jargon—I think our sociologists frequently come close to sinning against the language in this fashion. The jargon-monger must remember that the common reader may not be familiar with his special lingo. If he has something to say, he ought to put it into good, clean English language. Anyway, there's plenty of hope for the young writer; but I wouldn't know specifically what to tell him to do except to ask him to think out for himself what is it that I want to convey and to read the great masters of the language, those who lived in the past and those still alive and writing.

Comment: Thank you very much, Mr. Brooks. "You know" it's time for the end of the hour. Thank you.



*Mr. Brooks's address, "The Purpose and Use of the Humanities."*

## THE PURPOSE AND USE OF THE HUMANITIES

Introduction<sup>11</sup>: *General Woodyard, Colonel Rokke, Faculty of the English Department, Ladies and Gentlemen. We're so happy that you could find time in your busy schedules to be here this evening. While many of us at one time or another have been able to read about such poets as Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and E. E. Cummings, our distinguished speaker this evening has actually had the pleasure of meeting these gentlemen. Professor Cleanth Brooks, an internationally acclaimed scholar, is one of the most accomplished and respected American literary critics of the twentieth century.*

*After receiving his Bachelor of Arts from Vanderbilt University and his Masters from Tulane University, Professor Brooks attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Later, as a professor at Louisiana State University, he founded and edited with Robert Penn Warren The Southern Review. After leaving LSU, he became Gray Professor of Rhetoric at Yale University. Now Professor Emeritus, Professor Brooks has taught as visiting professor at several major southern universities including the University of Texas, Tulane, the Universities of North and South Carolina, and most recently at the University of Tennessee. He has been a Fellow of the Library of Congress; a Guggenheim Fellow; and Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Professor Brooks served as cultural attaché to the American Embassy in London. He is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Philosophical Society. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with a great deal of pride this evening that we welcome the distinguished professor, Cleanth Brooks.*

CB: Well, I don't know whether I march up here as a sacrificial victim or a conquering hero. It was certainly a thundering introduction that I have

received and I am grateful to the speaker who delivered it. I am very happy to be here at the Academy. I am not at all sure that I can measure up to the build up which has been so generously given me, and I think before I go any further I ought to issue a kind of warning. The next several minutes are going to be necessarily, I am afraid, filled with generalizations—the argument as it were. I hope, however, that if you can bear me out for the first seven or eight minutes, I shall get to something a little more juicy—a little more interesting, the illustrations of the argument that I want to propose.

The spirit of our age is practical and pragmatic. We are suspicious of anything that smacks of the arty and the over-refined. We tend to think of the Humanities as the embroidery of life and not at all as its substantial warp and woof. Our reasons go back, I suppose, a long, long way. After all, the first settlers of this continent, facing a howling wilderness, quickly dispensed with everything that seemed to be merely decorative or ancillary. After all, the conquest of the continent made them put everything behind them, for the time being at least, except for what they regarded as the harsh realities of life. And we, of course, as Americans of the twentieth century are their intellectual and spiritual heirs—their spiritual children. It is not easy, therefore, to make a case for the Humanities because of the reasons that I have just given. But the fact that it is hard to make a case for the Humanities doesn't mean for a moment that there isn't a case to be made. In fact, the basic case can be made in very simple terms. Those terms begin with a truism. The average American agrees that knowledge will help him to make a good living. Knowledge is power, we say. And it is the scientific knowledge of the physical universe that has given us our present tremendous control over nature; the instruments and machinery developed by our technological culture are truly the marvels of the modern day. Those of us who were born in the early twentieth century as I was, for example, literally began our lives in what was still the horse-and-buggy world. Sixty short years later, we are putting men on the moon. The growth in man's power is central to our whole accomplishment and for this power, of course, we have to thank primarily, I suppose, the mathematician, physicist, chemist, and the rest of the those who profess the hard sciences. But man does not live by machinery alone. If means—the means to do this, the means to do that—are clearly of the utmost importance, so are the ends and purposes. Any culture long on means but short on ends is probably in trouble; it will come to grief. Moreover, if the goal of a society is evil or simply trivial, simply meaningless, the society may destroy itself. Then where do the Humanities come into this argument? Precisely, with regard to goals, ends, values, and purposes. If we leave aside the claims of

theology, we are forced to rely on the Humanities to provide any systematic concern with ends and values. Since most of our colleges and universities are by constitution nondenominational and secular, such courses in the Humanities as are offered are probably the only courses that our college and university students have available that make any specific study of human and civilizational values.

In any case, even in a theologically grounded system, the Humanities have an enormously important civilizing role to play. For if one function of education is to provide us with the means of living a good life, the reciprocal function is to teach us how to live. If we hope to live a good and rewarding life, it is just as important to know how to spend our money as how to make our money. To put the matter in terms broader still, if a civilization needs an advanced technology to provide its population with the good things of life, the population needs to be educated in what those things are that are truly good and rewarding. The point I want to make is very simple, but if so, why hasn't it been seen very clearly by everybody in the population at large? Because, I would suggest, of the two pervasive fallacies. The first fallacy amounts to this: the conviction that if one possesses the means to live the good life, he doesn't need any further instruction; the good life will follow automatically. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. For example, take a very simple instance. The children of the rich have by definition more means than anybody else to accomplish this, to accomplish that, and to satisfy desires and some, of course, do choose very well; but others do not. So that wealth in itself does not guarantee blessedness—does not even guarantee simple happiness. As for civilizations, history would suggest that it is just when nations become most rich and powerful that they are most likely to succumb to a decline and fall.

The second fallacy is the naive belief that the sciences that have provided us with our vast knowledge of the means of the living a good life can be counted on also to provide us with a knowledge of what the proper values of life are. But to believe this is to fail to understand the very premises on which the exact sciences are based. Scientists quite deliberately leave out the personal equation and, for that matter, the moral equation. The triumph of science is based on the fact that science deals exclusively with impersonal and objectional forces and reactions. Thus scientific laws are not moral sanctions. For example, if in a given moment of despair, I decided to climb the highest building on this campus and jump off, thus ending a misspent life, I would not break a single scientific law. I might break various municipal or state laws which forbid people using public buildings to commit suicide, and I would surely break the moral law to which I subscribe, but I would not break any scientific

laws. Laws of this kind are by definition unbreakable. I would only fulfill such laws as for example the law that measures the speed of falling bodies. The scientific laws are simply descriptions of what necessarily happens under certain prescribed conditions. This is not to say scientists lack high ethical standards; it is to say that science *as such* does not deal with ethical and moral issues.

But what about what are called the social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Can't they give us a proper discipline in the values and ends of life? They certainly do deal with human actions and reactions, and what they have to tell us may be extremely useful. But I would argue that insofar as they are truly sciences, they have to be neutral, objective, and purely descriptive—just as neutral as are the hard sciences such as physics and chemistry. I am reminded at this point of a conversation I once had with a distinguished Yale colleague of mine who teaches anthropology. We were talking about this whole question of morals. He told me that anthropologists know of no primitive tribe that has survived, that has permitted murder within a certain degree of kinship, or that permits incest within a certain degree of kinship. I note that in accord with strict scientific methods, he did not say that it was *wrong* for a tribesmen to commit murder or incest among close kin; he was simply stating what happened or did not happen under certain circumstances.

Now, I would not have him answer otherwise. But as moral nourishment, it seems to me pretty thin soup, without enough vitamins or calories to count.

Well, I shall not attempt on this occasion to examine this complicated question of the relation of the social sciences to ethics and moral philosophy. In the first place, I probably lack the competence and I certainly lack the time on this occasion to deal with the problems adequately. Furthermore—and perhaps I have already said enough to introduce my specific argument this evening—mainly, that in most American schools and colleges the principal responsibility for providing a usable discipline in human values, purposes, and ends must fall upon such frankly nonscientific enterprises as a study of philosophy, history, and literature. Such has been the role of these disciplines for many centuries past. I would claim that it will probably have to be their role in our own culture. It is an important role though one still little properly appreciated. Such branches of philosophy as logic, esthetics and ethics do deal directly with what might be rationally regarded as the true, the beautiful, and the good; but as a people we do not easily take to this study of philosophy and personally—I am happy to make my own confession—that I have to sympathize with my fellow Americans on this

point. For I have not much head for philosophy, I tend to get lost among the abstractions. I wish I did not, for I grant that they have their importance.

History as a discipline is much more concrete. Essentially, it is the story of the human enterprise as man has conducted it since the beginning of recorded time. History then would seem to offer an opportunity to observe how men in the past have triumphed and failed and thus might even provide some useful lessons for us today. I think that it does, but too few of us read history or expect to learn anything from it. Robert Penn Warren, the poet and novelist, has remarked to me that no other age has shown such a contempt for history as our own age shows and I think he is right. And the reasons are not hard for us to seek. The man on the street is so much impressed with the technological wonders of our own day that he really believes that people who lacked our present scientific knowledge and technology could not have anything of importance to teach him. He probably forgets how little through the ages the essential human being has changed. Be that as it may, most of us are not historically minded—more's the pity—and believers in automatic progress as we are, we find history boring when we don't find it actually depressing. Well, this evening, I am not going to try to make the case for courses in philosophy and history as great humanizing and civilizing disciplines even though I believe that they are. I am not a philosopher and only an amateur historian. Therefore, I shall confine myself to the field that I know best—literature. But in choosing to establish the purpose and use of literature, I believe that I am attempting a much harder task than that represented by philosophy or history. For many people who still concede that philosophy and history may have something to teach them, regard literature as good for no more than amusement; and since an increasingly nonreading public finds most literature boring, they see no value in it at all—not even amusement.

Well what can be said for literature? Aside from the pleasure it may give misguided folk like me and your English professors? In particular, what use is that most useless branch of literature, poetry? We need, I think, an illustration here—an example—let's try to find one that may be useful. I expect everybody here has surely read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. You will remember that this play is no mere cautionary tale. It doesn't warn the reader that murder will out or that the wages of sin is death; nor that if you are thinking of committing a serious crime, that you should look before you leap. The play is much more complicated than a mere lesson in morals. It is nearly as complicated as life itself, though perhaps more concentrated and focused than most real-life experiences are.

Our reaction to the play is complicated too. In spite of all his faults



Macbeth is more than simply a wicked man: he is a complex human being in whom great virtues and great vices are closely intertwined. At the end we are glad to see this bloody tyrant killed. But our total reaction is complicated too. There was something brave, dauntless, and even noble about this greatly erring man. Although we think that it is right and proper that Macduff should cut him down in the end, we are also aware of the sheer human waste that his loss entails. We are aware of the corruption of what was potentially a great and good man. I ask you to take special note of these aspects of this great piece of literature; on the surface it seems almost as neutral and detached as a physical or chemical laboratory experiment. That is, it doesn't insist that we make this interpretation or draw that conclusion. Second, it has some of the qualities of life itself. In fact, it seems to have a life of its own—its own drive and vitality. Third, it provides us with a full-bodied experience, not a statement about life or conclusion about how to live, but the sense of an experience actually lived through by a fellow human being. These aspects of *Macbeth* seem to me an aspect of all authentic literary art. In these qualities of literary art abides the characteristic wisdom that literature can give us. How does what I call wisdom differ from most other knowledge? From all mere information? Information is just piles of facts, valuable to be sure but only as material that we may put to use. Information is a means to an end. What we call knowledge tends to be of a higher grade than just information. It is information sorted and organized and selected. It may have great value, but we tend to reserve the term wisdom for a higher knowledge still: a knowledge of values and purposes. Note that in distinguishing between information and wisdom, we are back once again to the difference between means and ends. Between the machinery of life and the goals to be achieved by whatever machinery we may be fortunate enough to possess. Wisdom usually implies not merely knowledge but self-discipline. Moreover, we think of it also as deriving from experience, not just the accumulation of facts but as the fruits of a life lived. Now reading a book is not, of course, the same thing as living through one's own life. But it can give us what I would call a simulacrum of experience, because a piece of great literature is the creation of a fine and sensitive mind. To experience great poems, novels, and plays can help the reader in acquiring wisdom. Let me again sum up the argument that technological society may be long on facts and specialized knowledge, but very short on wisdom. In fact, it may actually inhibit the cultivation of wisdom. A great poet of our own age has put the matter, I think, brilliantly. He speaks of endless invention, endless experiment bringing "Knowledge of motion but not of stillness, / Knowledge of speech but not of silence, / Knowledge of words but ignorance of the

Word; / Where is the life we have lost in living, / Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge, / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" So much for generalizations.

You have been very patient while I have fed you a great deal of generalization and abstraction, lightened by only one bit of concrete illustration. It is high time that I should offer some concrete applications of what, up to this point, I have been talking about in very general terms. I shall try to illustrate from poems rather than from short stories for particular reasons. Short stories are longer to handle, and though I could make the same points with them, a poem provides something short, condensed and I think will be best for our use tonight. Consider the following short poem by Robert Frost—I don't know whether it is too dark for you to read it or not. It would be for me with my near-sighted eyes. Or you may want to follow it as I read it. The very title "Provide, Provide"<sup>12</sup> seems to make it a preachment—an obviously didactic poem that insists on teaching us something. But look at it and listen to it, and you may decide that it only pretends to be didactic. Here it is:

The witch that came (the withered hag)  
To wash the steps with pail and rag  
Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.  
Too many fall from great and good  
For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.  
Or if predestined to die late,  
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
If need be occupy a throne,  
Where nobody can call you crone.

Some have relied on what they knew,  
Others on being simply true.  
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starved  
Atones for later disregard  
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified  
 With boughten friendship by your side  
 Than none at all. Provide, provide!

Since unfortunately, so many people nowadays have stopped reading the Bible, I had better tell you right away who Abishag—the Abishag mentioned in line 3—was. When King David had grown old and feeble and ill—so that even when covered up with clothes, he got no heat, the Hebrew elders chose a beautiful maiden named Abishag to put into bed with him, to warm him up. This incident is not from a pornographic novel. You can find it in 1 Kings 1:1-4. But apparently the poor fellow still got no heat, for he was soon gathered to his fathers. Now I don't know why Frost chose to call his ex-Hollywood star, Abishag. Maybe he saw an amusing ironic resemblance between the use to which the Hollywood elders, the Warner Brothers, and such like, put beautiful American maidens. But Frost's reason does not really matter here. He could have chosen another name for her and the general meaning of the poem would scarcely be altered.

Frost presents poor Abishag reduced to a scrub woman. Isn't he using a rather far-fetched example to point up his advice to be prudent and thrifty? I don't think so; for me at least, his lines 4 to 6 provide adequate justification. The newspapers for years past have been filled with notices of celebrities who finally died in poverty—famous prize fighters, and an occasional painter or writer, and many an actor or actress—I for one do not doubt the least likelihood of Frost's sad little story. Then, what do we do about it? How shall we avoid Abishag's miserable fate?

Frost seems to be full of advice. You can take the precaution of dying early, dying while in your prime and glory or in your wonderful youth. But if you don't want to die early, or are unable to manage so prompt an exit, then for goodness sakes, make provisions to die in state:

Die early and avoid the fate.  
 Or if predestined to die late,  
 Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
 If need be occupy a throne,  
 Where nobody can call you crone.

Get rich—that is the obvious solution: "If need be occupy a throne." Frost goes on to say and maybe he is thinking here how one movie star, Grace Kelly, managed matters, or maybe Frost just needed a rhyme to

chime with "own" and "crone." In any case, I find here no mean-spirited reference to Grace Kelly, whom I expect old Robert Frost rather admired. The poem goes on in his concluding stanzas to stress his basic point. Be sure to avoid poor Abishag's fate, using whatever expedient you may because your memories of having once been a star are not going to make up for people's having forgotten all about you when you're old and worn.

Some of you will, of course, protest at those lines—

Better to go down dignified  
With boughten friendship at your side  
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

Some of you will protest: "but you can't buy friendship." Who wants store-brought love? What good will that be? But your protest ought not to be directed at the poet. For if you look at the poem, you will see that Frost never says that "boughten friendship" is worth much anyway. And his use of the old-fashioned idiom of the Yankee countryside ought to make his real attitude plain. What Frost does say is that boughten friendship is better than none at all. When you are throwing away your money in the Las Vegas gambling casinos or buying worthless gold stocks, remember that you are not likely to make any genuine friendships in such carryings on—and if you don't even emerge from such activities as these with some of the cash left, then where are you?

Shall we say then, that the meaning of the poem amounts to Iago's advice in the play *Othello*: "put money in thy purse?" I think only a superficial reader could dismiss this poem in that fashion. The tone of this poem everywhere qualifies what might seem to be the literal meaning. The tone is sardonic, half amused and half contemptuous. Surely one of the prescriptions for avoiding Abishag's fate—that is, die early—is ironic whimsy; Frost doesn't expect anyone to take *that* advice. The speaker well knows how few of us are going to avail ourselves of that particular expedient. But the poem does contain one hint of a positive course of action. Tucked into the body of the poem almost as a quiet aside—almost as a set of throw-away lines—almost as an absent-minded interpolation—is this stanza:

Some have relied on what they knew,  
Others on simply being true  
What worked for them might work for you.

In order to face and endure life's inevitable ending, some people have

relied on their own integrity; mere truth and goodness evidently suffice for them. You might try that recipe yourself. But the folksy idiom of "what worked for them might work for you" cleanses—I think entirely cleanses the poem of any suggestion of preachy-ness and heavy-handed moralization.

This wise observation though—offered almost as an afterthought—is in fact the core of the poem, the moral base on which it rests. The poem then is not a mere parcel of facts. 'As someone has wisely remarked, we ought not to consider any of the humanities as an item of fixed subject matter, just course material, just something you take. Rather we should regard knowledge of the humanities as a civilizing skill that can help us make the most of our lives. To make the most requires character and discipline. Since to achieve a civilized life requires the most important skill of all, it is reasonable to assume that to read a poem about how to live a good life itself requires—or may require—a special skill.

If we dismiss that skill as useless and unnecessary, we risk remaining locked in our little squalid, private prisons, prisons from which the great novelists and poets might liberate us. In short, it is worthwhile to learn how to read poetry. This little poem, I think, contains wisdom, but the presentation of it, I want to insist, is ironic—almost light-hearted. Not prim or oversolemn. It is not arty or pretentious; it is geared to the facts of contemporary American life. I can read the story of our Abishag in our daily newspapers and have done so for at least the last forty years of my life—and so can you if you live long enough to go through a few more decades. Yet, note one important particular: unlike the newspaper reports, the poet asks you to use good sense and imagination, and some effort if you are to get the true meaning of what he says. He pays you, the reader, the compliment of believing that you have a mind and know how to read. The careless, or inattentive, or merely numbskull reader will miss entirely what the poet has to say to us.

Here is another example, a poem that is perhaps a bit more complicated: "Channel Firing."<sup>13</sup> It is by the great English novelist and poet, Thomas Hardy, who died just fifty years ago. Perhaps I should read through it:

That night your great guns, unawares,  
Shook all our coffins as we lay,  
And broke the chancel window-squares,  
We thought it was the Judgment-day

And sat upright. While drearishome  
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:

The mouse let fall the alter-crumb,  
The worms drew back into the mounds,

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, "No;  
It's gunnery practice out at sea  
Just as before you went below;  
The world is as it used to be:

"All nations striving strong to make  
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters  
They do no more for Christes sake  
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

"That this is not the judgment-hour  
For some of them's a blessed thing,  
For if it were they'd have to scour  
Hell's floor for so much threatening. . .

"Ha, ha. It will be warmer when  
I blow the trumpet (if indeed  
I ever do; for you are men,  
And rest eternal sorely need)."

So down we lay again. "I wonder,  
Will the world ever saner be,"  
Said one, "than when He sent us under  
In our indifferent century!"

And many a skeleton shook his head.  
"Instead of preaching forty year,"  
My neighbor Parson Thirdly said,  
"I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer."

Again the guns disturbed the hour,  
Roaring their readiness to avenge,  
As far inland as Stourton Tower,  
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

This poem is intensely dramatic—even shockingly so. It actually begins with a bang, a roar of gunfire. The scene is a peaceful one, a churchyard, I would think. Perhaps in Dorchester on the south coast of England. There bursts upon the quiet of this scene the sound of naval guns

fired out in the English Channel. The fleet is practicing for war. I might mention, by the way, that Hardy dated this poem, April, 1914. By August and September those big guns on both sides would be firing in earnest. The hackneyed way to put matters would be to say that you would have thought the noise was loud enough to wake the dead. But genuine poetry eschews hackneyed expressions or sometimes, as here, it simply shocks the tired old expressions back into brisk, pristine vitality. Thus, the noise does indeed wake the dead, who in their bewilderment conclude that the Day of Judgment is at hand. The poet asks us to imagine what we would see, if the dead could be awakened. How would the scene appear?

The noise of gunfire has started nature too. Hounds howl; the church mouse lets fall its little altar crumb; even the phlegmatic cow out in the pasture outside the church pauses a moment from chewing its cud. More portentous still, God Himself has been moved to take note of this untimely rumpus, and the poet has boldly tried to imagine what the Dread Judge would say at hearing this man-made imitation of the shock of doom. How would God address the dead? What would He say to men who would have been startled out of their sleep, prematurely by their fellow-men's escalation of their power to kill.

Thus, modernism shoulders its way into this immemorially quiet and peaceful world that has changed so little during the centuries. The church might well be a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century structure and the little graveyard around would contain skeletons of men buried centuries before. Upon this scene then bursts not only the thunder of the guns but the bitter comments of an anthropomorphic Diety who vents his irritation, his sarcasm, and contemptuous pity on the incorrigible creatures whom He has created. He tells the startled dead that in all the centuries since they were laid into the grave, there has been no improvement in human life. The world is as it used to be.

One notices too that in making God speak, the poet does not put into His mouth the sonorous language of, say, the King James version of the Bible. Instead, God addresses the dead in everyday, even colloquial, terms. For example, God says that the nations are as "mad as hatters." Those of you who have read *Alice in Wonderland* may remember the mad tea party that Alice attended, in company with the Mad Hatter and the Mad March Hare. You may not remember, however, that actual hatters had peculiar problems, because of the mercury they used in the felting process. Men who had worked for years as hatters contracted the shakes and other symptoms. To be as mad as a hatter became a proverbial phrase and though it does not get into the poem, being mad as a march hare might be worth explaining here. I think I know the answer now. In England, March is the breeding season for the hares. The females are suppose to

chase the males, and apparently this amuses the British a great deal. That this should be so proves that in March the hares really are mad.

Hardy's God has a sense of humor, though it is certainly on the sarcastic side. For those firing the guns and preparing for war, it is a good thing that it isn't the Judgment Day. God is offended not only by man's blood-thirstiness but by his pride in his own strength. Worse still perhaps, there is the fact that man has assumed one of the prerogatives of God. Some readers will remember the verse, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, said the Lord."

Finally, God breaks into laughter, Hardy actually has him utter the derisive syllables, "Ha, ha." Now, the only place in the Bible in which "ha, ha" occurs—I have looked it up myself—is in the book of Job, where God, talking with his servant Job, describes the exaltation of the warhorse as he hears the sound of the trumpets from afar. He says of the horse, "He saith among the trumpets, 'Ha, ha' and he smelleth the battle far off—the thunder of the captains and the shouting." Perhaps the naval guns practicing for warfare brought to the poet's mind the warhorse laughing in his fierce joy. But, if that is what put the "Ha, ha" in the poet's mind in this poem, he has here boldly assigned it to God Himself.

God thus has his little joke. It will be harder when He blows the trumpet—a blast that will not call the dead to battle but will summon them to the last Judgment. God goes on to give it further twist to his jesting statement, "... (if indeed / I ever do; for you are men, / And rest eternal sorely need)."

Now, Hardy is clearly here remembering a poem by Jonathan Swift—you remember the man who wrote *Gulliver's Travels* centuries earlier—in which the poet has imagined the Day of Judgment having arrived when each pale sinner hangs his head; but Swift's grave judge surprisingly announces to the awakened dead:

The World's mad Business now is o'er,  
And I resent these Pranks no more.  
I to such Blockheads set my Wit!  
I damn such Fools! Go, go, you're bit.<sup>14</sup>

The last sentence translated into contemporary American speech would read, "Come, come you've been had." Swift was a clergyman, as some of you may remember; he had a pretty low opinion of man as Man. At any rate, he evidently did not think it too blasphemous to suggest that God Himself might not consider it beneath His dignity to damn such a miserable creature as man has turned out to be. Remembering Swift's poem, we may refrain from supposing that an attitude like Hardy's is



merely an expression of modern times. God's sarcastic "Ha, ha"—or its equivalent—has been heard from time to time in earlier centuries.

What is the effect of God's words on the dead men who have been buried—some of them, one supposes, centuries before, and all presumably—in the Christian hope of resurrection? The dead man who is the speaker for the group says simply, "So down we lay again," but before they resume their long sleep, one of them expresses his doubt:

". . . Will the world ever saner be,  
 . . . 'than when He sent us under  
 In our indifferent century!' "

There follows then the line, "And many a skeleton shook his head." This by the way, come to think of it, might be a perilous enterprise for a skeleton to try to indulge in. How would he keep it on his neck?

The present group of dead men might almost, however, seem to be a group of elder statesmen disappointed in their hopes and now able to make no good prognosis for the future. For centuries past they have not only been informed by the Christian hope of a world of peace and a life after death, the dead men seem also to have expected that as the generations passed, men would surely become saner. Hardy's choice of the word here may be significant—not more peaceful or kindly or loving, he says, but simply more *sane*. In short, the men of the past, whether or not they had really believed in the myth of progress, believed—at least had hoped—for better times to come.

One skeleton whom the speaker calls "my neighbor"—that is, he whose bones lie in the adjoining grave—is a Parson himself—perhaps a former Parson of this very church. He wonders audibly whether in view of what has just been said, His servants, His service, and His church were not a waste of time. He mutters, "I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer." The Parson's ambitions for common pleasures, by the way, could he relive his life, are rather modest—no dreams of having been a glamorous highwayman robbing the London mail coach or having been a Byronic lover. That is, he wishes only that he had had more tobacco and more beer, less fasting and fewer prayers; as a sinner this humdrum parson remains in character.

The reader may be puzzled, however, that Hardy should give his parson such an odd name. Whoever heard of any person with a surname "Thirdly." As a surname, the Manhattan and the London telephone directories know it not. But if one reflects on the matter, he may come up with the right answer. Parson Thirdly probably wrote old-fashioned sermons that began, "Firstly," and then proceeded to "Secondly," and

then in due course to "Thirdly," and so on. One imagines that the sermons he preached during his forty years of surmonizing must have seemed tiresomely long to the congregations that had to listen to them.

The half amused irony of this section of the poem gives way, however, to a very different tone in the last stanza. The poem began with a volley of the guns, and now the huge weapons speak out once more; but in this final stanza man's wars are placed in the long perspective of history and the tone of the poem alters to admit something of the grand and even the heroic in the long story of man's struggles as a fighting animal. As the sound of the guns moves inland from the English Channel, the poet imagines it penetrating to various spots that have a place in British history. As the sound carries us farther and farther northward in space, it also carries us further and further backward in time. Stourton Tower marks the spot where King Alfred won a victory over the Danes in 980 AD. As for Camelot, no one knows quite where it was or even if it ever existed. But Arthur's royal capitol is usually placed somewhere in this region of Southwest England, and the very name evokes events and personages associated with the gallant legendary king of the fifth century who opposed the heathen invaders. Finally, Stonehenge, far back from the coast on Salisbury plain takes us into prehistory. These names do indeed speak of old, unhappy, far off things and battles long ago, but they speak also of glory. Seen in the long perspective of his past, man seems hopelessly committed to destructive combat. Yet, the note on which the poem closes is not one of acrimonious spite. Man's heroism seems inextricably linked with his cruelty; his virtues are only the other side of his vices.

This poem, I venture, would not have been very effective for reading at a 1969 peace rally. It was not written to promote a single limited issue. On the contrary, it takes the longest view and involves the widest possible context. It is not propangandistic but contemplative. So richly coherent is this poem that even a particular adjective can be freighted with meaning. Consider the adjective "starlit" in the last line: "And Camelot, and *starlit* Stonehenge." All the association of the stars with eternity, with detachment from humanity, with lonely splendor, with astrological portense, with worlds incredibly far away and far older than the earth itself. All of these associations are brought to bear upon the climactic point of the poem.

I can imagine someone remarking, "Yes, it is undoubtedly a fine poem, but what a curious choice of a poem to read to a group of students at the United States Air Force Academy." On the contrary, I think that this is the perfect place in which to demonstrate the authenticity of the poem. It is not a slogan-chanting, anti-war poem. True, the poem takes a somber

view of man as a contentious animal given to fighting. The reference to King Alfred's resistance to the Danes invading Britain and a reference to Camelot suggest that Hardy did not lump all laws together as equally wrong. In any case, "Channel Firing" is not a specifically pacifist poem at all. As a matter of fact, if we want to appeal to the record of Hardy the man, Hardy was late to write some poems supporting the 1914-1918 war in which Britain and France were engaged against Germany. Mind you, I am not trying to make Hardy's point more palatable to you as Air Force cadets; I am simply pointing out that the poem is not at all a shrill, one-issue poem, but, on the contrary, that the meaning of the poem is rich, full, and complex. If there is any one single issue that the poem rather clearly does bring under attack, it is the oversimple notion of progress. A too fatuous belief that the enlightenment of the twentieth century will solve mankind's problems, that a period of uninterrupted peace and prosperity will necessarily ensue. The history of the last sixty years surely indicates that there was wisdom in *this* poet's view of the human situation as set forth in this poem written in 1914. Subsequent events have revealed that it is the statesmen and the political leaders of the time whose views of man have proved to be rather shallow and overconfident—not this poet's.

Hardy's "Channel Firing," I believe, shows the same quality of wisdom: deep insight, balanced judgment that we find in Andrew Marvell's great "Horatian Ode" which deals with the fundamental issues in the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. "Channel Firing" also reminds me of one of Herman Melville's poems about our own American Civil War in the nineteenth century. Yet in stressing the deep, good sense shown by Hardy in his appraisal of the human situation with reference to man's propensities for warfare, I do not mean to imply that literature's values are limited to such circumstances as war and peace or those with which Frost concerns himself in "Provide, Provide." Literature involves a much more general discipline. Such reading quickens our responses to the complexity of the human situation: It flexes the muscles of the mind. It makes us stretch beyond our usual attitudes and our conventional ways of regarding things. Great literature provides solid nourishment, not merely for our intellects and for our aptitude for practical action but for the whole of our being. Literature nourishes intellectual man, passionate man, spiritual man, as they are all conjoined in the full human personality. Great literature compels one to respond fully, completely, as a total being and in doing so we may discover what are truly our deepest beliefs and our most profoundly held values. To learn how to read great literature *is* a civilizing skill, indeed.

I thank you very much.



*CIC Robert C. McAdams presents Mr. Brooks with a memento—a print of Bafin, the Academy's falcon mascot—after his address.*

## NOTES

1. *Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978).
2. This comment refers back to an earlier session and remark, q.v., p. 9.
3. Kathleen Coburn, ed., *Notebooks* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951).
4. Distinguished Visiting Professor of English, 1977-78, from the University of Denver.
5. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1975).
6. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).
7. Granville Hicks reviewed that book, "At Home with the Snopeses," in *Saturday Review*, 7 December 1963, pp. 37-8.
8. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963).
9. "The Poet & The City" in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp. 72-89.
10. Situation comedy.
11. Made by CIC Robert C. McAdams for the Cadet Forum.
12. *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 404.
13. James Gibson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), pp. 305-6.
14. "The Day of Judgement," in *Swift: Poetical Works*, edited by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 516.

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Compiled by James A Grimshaw, Jr. A modified version of this checklist will appear in *First Printings of American Authors*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Detroit: Gale Research).

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